

## **Written evidence submitted by Linda Fox, Chairwoman of Actonians LFC**

### **1. What brings girls and women to your local club and what impacts their participation?**

The fact that it is local is very important, it needs to be easy for parents to bring their daughters to training and games. Not everyone drives and for families with more than 1 child there are often conflicting activities. Also in some cases the girls do not have parents that are able to bring them and they travel by themselves, if it's not local, that won't be possible.

I'm highlighting this because of the importance of there being enough clubs available in all areas for girls to play at so that they don't have to travel too far. It also needs to be grass roots clubs where everyone is welcome and have an opportunity to join regardless of ability. Elite teams are obviously needed for progression, but these should not be counted as playing opportunities for the vast majority as only a few will be able to play for them.

For women the location is also important, it needs to be easy to get to via public transport as most people are coming straight from work. The quality of the facility (adequate toilets, lighting, changing facilities and surface) and the safety of the local area is also important to not put people off coming.

Cost is a big factor for all age groups, since they are paying the expect all of the above as a minimum and the cost needs to be fair and seen as value for money, otherwise players and families will choose to put their money towards other things.

Aside from that what keeps people coming back or joining us I think is an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere that allows people to be themselves, I would say that goes for all ages and all levels. After that comes the level of football and quality of coaching and the infrastructure around the club. But that can only be improved once the basics are in place like good facilities and a friendly, supportive and welcoming environment.

### **2. What challenges is your grassroots sports club facing, and what assistance is required?**

The rising costs is currently our biggest challenge, particularly for venue hire. There are very few options for training facilities that tick all the above boxes and those that exist know there is a huge demand and can charge accordingly. When facilities are built on public land, they should not be operated by profit making companies who price out grass roots clubs! More affordable, floodlit 3G pitches are needed.

There are also not enough pitches for teams who progress in the pyramid where there are certain ground requirements. For us, with a 1st team playing in Tier 4, we have very few options locally and we are currently playing outside of our local area. This makes it hard to attract followers and supporters on match days, which in turn stops us from making the most of gate receipts and a potential route to increased financial sustainability. Most of the suitable grounds are run by men's

clubs and are either oversubscribed with ground sharing arrangements in place with other men's clubs, or they charge so much that we can not afford it.

The fact the women's leagues are played on Sundays also means we are the last to use the pitch each week, which can affect the quality of the surface. Often also the lowest priority for the club owners and many games get called off to preserve the surface for their men's teams.

When new pitches/facilities get built, there needs to be a consideration of the whole pyramid, both men's and women's, not just grassroots and participation as without a strong pyramid there will be no pathway to the top tiers or the England teams. This is so important for motivation and aspirations at grass roots level. If these facilities don't exist, only wealthy professional clubs will be able to compete higher up in the pyramid and independent clubs will be stuck at lower levels even if they are good enough to progress further.

We do face a challenge as an independent club in that now that women's football has become popular, bigger men's clubs finally want to get involved, pump money into their women's teams (and rightly so) but in effect this starts to push out the independent clubs who have been supporting the game for years, have the knowledge and passion but can no longer compete as players and parents prefer to choose the big badge clubs where they don't have to pay, or even get paid.

I would like to see a funding option (perhaps a grant) that only independent self-funded clubs are eligible to apply for to stand a chance at keeping their place in the pyramid that has only come through sheer hard work for many years by unpaid volunteers.

My fear however is that in 10 years' time, the women's game in the top 4 tiers will only consist of teams funded by their men's parent clubs. The women's game would lose the unique selling points it now has and become fully dependent on the men's game and their often erratic owners, would be real step backwards in my opinion.

### **3. Do you see class-barriers to participation in football for girls and women who cannot afford the costs involved?**

Yes, especially for girls where the parents are struggling financially. We find that there is a real balance between the club needing to cover costs and not putting the fees too high. Although we have a fairly middle-class membership, we do also support some families who would otherwise not be able to join. I think the real issue might be however that most of the ones that are really struggling terribly won't even get in touch about joining so we might not really know the extent of the problem. Which could be true for us as we are based in a very diverse area and perhaps we are not seeing that totally reflected in our teams.

There are also more and more elitist clubs forming, calling themselves academies and charging high fees, where the club is run as a profit-making business, which is also contributing to the sport becoming more middle class.

Hence why it is so important that girls get the chance to play in school so that they don't get excluded completely and have opportunities to find the passion for the game without cost, travel or the need for parental support which may not always be available.

#### **4. What messages and action would you and your team like to see from football governing bodies on gender parity?**

On the whole I think that the FA and England and the County FA's are doing a good job in promoting women's football. The women are given the same platform and visibility as the men, certainly on their social media channels which is so important in reaching the younger generations and make this a fact of life for them growing up, something they will just expect to see. The language they use is also very positive and I think they just need to keep this up so that it becomes the total norm.

Behind the scenes, there needs to be more women in influential and decision-making roles in the game as a whole to make sure the women's game isn't always an afterthought or an add on. Certainly a lot of clubs have work to do in this area. There needs to be some pressure from the government to encourage this, and make sure clubs take this seriously enough, there needs to be adequate channels for reporting abuse in the stadiums and work to create a more inclusive environment, and consequences for offenders.