

Written evidence submitted by Russell Goldstein and Liam Palfreeman

Parliamentary Call for Evidence – Sports Governance.

December 6th 2020.

I am Russell Goldstein, 26 years old and I graduated from Loughborough with a Sports and Business degree. I am also a sportsman who plays at the highest level I can in England, have represented England in international competitions and care passionately for my sport. This joint submission also includes evidence from my team mate, Liam Palfreeman.

I am submitting this evidence to the Select Committee as a direct response to the following questions posed by the select committee:

- Are current sports governance models fit for purpose?
 - At what level of sport should the government consider spending public money?
- What are the biggest risks to the long-term viability of grassroots sport?
 - What key measures could the Government introduce to increase the resilience of sports clubs and venues?
- To what extent should elite professional sports support the lower leagues and grassroots?
 - How should the Government make this happen?

My submission is based on my own personal experience including playing at an international level for 8 years as well as my degree studies. In addition to addressing these specific points, I feel obliged to provide more background about my sport and its particular issues and opportunities. In this case the failure of governance is so extreme that the entire English community of a significant and rapidly growing international sport appears to have been left without functional governance. The evidence for this claim is that the highest level English Teams recently found out through the national press just days before they were due to compete in the Euro's that they were being defunded and disbanded. This single action showed such disrespect and contempt for the years of hard work put in by so many. Public funds and trust given to the governing body was rendered valueless by its unilateral, ill-informed actions. The top representatives put forward by the governing body to liaise with national team players supposedly in defense of the sport turned out to know nothing about it! My personal sacrifices and tireless commitment along with my team mates and our national youth teams was vapourised by the very organisation we had trusted and invested in to be our advocates. If it were possible to make the situation any worse, the governing body has tried to blame Covid-19 as being somehow linked to their decision. Given the hundred's of millions of pounds budget this organisation handles, and the relatively insignificant sums saved by demolishing these national teams combined with the much further reaching impact on the sport as a whole, the evidence of a huge failure of governance is overwhelming.

I believe it is just these kind of failures that leave sports communities demoralised and destabilised and with no place to turn for support other than The Government. I sincerely hope that I can help bring about the necessary changes that, if forthcoming, will enable Futsal to have a major impact in addressing Sport England and Government objectives. No sport can deliver when shackled by long term disinterest and even outright hostility from its own governing body – in this case, The Football Association.

My own sports journey started with playing football at school. I loved playing and at 16 I looked around for opportunities to embark on a more serious playing career. Sadly there were no suitable openings. Not only that, but I experienced a considerable amount of negativity and discouragement. Fortunately, a Jewish youth organisation agreed to sponsor my participation in an international Jewish futsal tournament in Israel. There are no words to express the effect that this futsal experience had on me. Despite some disappointing game scores, I was so intoxicated with the energy, speed, intensity and strategic aspects of futsal that I came back to England intent on making the sport mine. My performance was good enough to earn an introduction to the England U23's and 2 years later my first international appearance in Andorra.

Although there were limited options enabling me to focus on my futsal development, I was successful in joining the International Futsal Academy in Loughborough where I could fully immerse in intensive futsal training along side my

degree course. It felt so motivating to be part of the futsal community both at home and internationally. Futsal is all about tight knit teams, close collaboration, skill and personal development which is so different from my football experiences.

So to address the first two questions posed:

Are current sports governance models fit for purpose?

At what level of sport should the government consider spending public money?

Sports Governance models that can allow what has happened to our national futsal teams along with all the knock-on effects throughout the futsal community to take place in such an unaccountable, undemocratic and disrespectful manner are totally unacceptable and if allowed to continue, surely tarnish the whole sports support and funding process. It is so easy to fall into the trap of basing the value of a sport on its budgets and finances when in fact these are very poor measures. A much better indicator of value is the ratio of funding to the level of commitment and nature of participation. Unfortunately this data is not known to the governing body, in part because the governing body treats futsal as a training aid for football rather than the separate international sport that it is.

I don't think it is possible to give a specific level that government funding should be considered. It makes far more sense to apply funding wherever needed to bring biggest benefits. Examples like [Carlisle Futsal Club](#) show that well structured setups can be self sustaining. In the case of futsal, given what it can (and does already) achieve with such small budgets, the greatest role for government funding is to provide autonomous stability and increase visibility to grow the community to a sustainable critical mass. So many activities within futsal have potential to generate their own income once futsal actually breaks free from being forcibly buried within a compromised governing body already struggling with issues facing its primary concern - football.

Regarding the next points:

What are the biggest risks to the long-term viability of grassroots sport?

What key measures could the Government introduce to increase the resilience of sports clubs and venues?

The biggest risks to long-term viability of grassroots sport stem from lack of participation. Participation is driven by perceived value and while football might be regarded as the nation's number one sport, that is based on commercial and financial measures. In terms of player development and sustaining vibrant, active sporting communities, football's actual achievements are more evident in promoting gambling and TV viewing than in producing home grown playing talent. The skill development, team-centred community focus that inevitably forms as part of futsal participation is exactly the kind of activity that can strengthen resilience and maintain engagement. A key part of building resilience can come from integration with education at all levels – another area in which futsal is ideally suited and would offer great potential given suitable promotion. A key role of Government would be to take into account futsal's international success in order to better understand its true potential, then require The FA to put in place transparent and accountable funding mechanisms to allow Futsal to prove and develop itself.

On the final points:

To what extent should elite professional sports support the lower leagues and grassroots?

How should the Government make this happen?

If by “... elite professional sports support the lower leagues....” it is meant 'finance lower leagues', then this does not make sense in the context of futsal at the present time. However, perhaps more so than in the past, the highest value of 'support' is actually best measured by how much quality participation there is, how much that participation is valued by those involved, and what that participation actually achieves. Like me, most who play futsal value the opportunity and experience above all else. For the national teams, it actually cost us money to represent our country since it often involved taking unpaid holiday from work. That is surely a valid measure of value. And by maintaining those national teams we also provide the biggest incentive for future generations to take on the same challenges, directly

investing their own passion and experience back into the game.

The role of government to help make that happen is very simple in the case of futsal. Give the sport the recognition it deserves. Take the trouble to research actual participation and more importantly, retention levels. Don't rely on The FA as their data can easily be discredited. For many reasons, they just don't have accurate figures. University and College players may well not be recorded by The FA. Many teams registered only as football teams also play futsal without separate registration. Consider responses presented to the Call for Evidence and carry out your own further investigations and you will discover the true potential that Futsal has to offer as well as the flagrant waste if previous indeterminable investment is allowed to be hidden and written off by an out of touch, disinterested and unrepresentative governing body.

There are also some important objectives that would be a big help to seeing futsal growth really take off. While big investment is not appropriate and could even have a negative effect in the medium to long term, steady commitment and promotion as part of concerted, coordinated policies implemented by trusted and experienced leaders would surely address government objectives.

- Finding a major organisation like SkySport to agree to sustained futsal coverage and promotion. Games at Copperbox and St. George's Park have already demonstrated there is support, and with some promotion that would grow.
- Facilitating local league games across a range of levels with national central venue playoffs would also help to establish a loyal following. Providing clubs and venues with templates and promotional tools to get set up and integrated with a national vision would really boost availability and participation.

Being very much skill based, futsal lends itself to being taught in the school environment. Ball mastery and close team collaboration are fundamental to the sport and align well with school sport needs and objectives. Futsal has been made available in the GCSE curriculum so it is ironic that there is no longer a pathway to play at the highest international level. Futsal built around school and higher education facilities can be even more of a win as it brings in additional funds to schools while also strengthening their communities.

My England team mate **Liam Palfreeman** is currently in Italy where he plays futsal professionally. His testimony which follows again demonstrates the huge governance issue facing futsal in England.

Liam says:

When the governing body of my sport suddenly disbanded our national teams (including the one I played for) I realised just how important it is to have a stable governance structure.

The questions I intend to address are:

- Are current sports governance models fit for purpose?
- What are the biggest risks to the long-term viability of grassroots sport?
- The role of the Elite-game in supporting grassroots.

I am Liam Palfreeman from Oxford and I'm 25 years old. I studied Sport at Oxford College based on my love for football. My coach suggested that I should try playing Futsal as it might be better suited to my playing attributes and as a result I played my first futsal game for Cherwell Valley College against an established team at Loughborough University in 2012. We lost by a big margin but I was totally hooked by the feel of the game. The fast pace, the intensity, the skill and strategic element were so different from anything I had experienced before.

It wasn't an easy choice to make between trying to find a pathway in professional football with a chance of making money compared with Futsal where the biggest attraction was the chance of playing the game I loved to represent my country. In the end I opted for Futsal. I really felt my passion for the game would give me chance to give something back and I still hope one day I will have chance to excite and attract more young players to futsal. For reasons I don't understand, English Futsal doesn't seem to have found the support it enjoys in other countries. This is especially frustrating when I hear talk about the need to build sustainable and inclusive sport communities. Wherever I have seen futsal get established I have seen supporting communities grow around it. Even my mum who never had much interest in Football loved watching futsal games. The English Futsal clubs like ProFutsal ([ProFutsal Vision](#)) and Bloomsbury ([Bloomsbury Futsal for Football](#)) are examples of what futsal has to offer. The missing link is to join up pockets of excellence and use best practice as the foundations for national adoption.

After playing the 2015-16 season for Oxford Lions at the top English national level and winning, I then went on to play in the UEFA Champions League. Seeing the scale and popularity of the sport in Europe I was really excited by its prospects in England, at the hands of The World's richest Football Association. The FA's Fast Forward with Futsal strategy launched in 2018 promised so much, including serious objectives for the women's game in support of women's football. My personal objectives were for a record number of appearances for England and to use success playing abroad to bring skills, success and excitement back home. I am currently playing professionally in the Italian Serie B which has a solid national TV and Internet following. It's great to feel part of an international community and to see Teams like Germany, Scotland and Ireland play make their Euro debuts. I can't express my dismay when I heard that The FA was pulling England out of international Futsal. What it says about the sport is that 'we just don't care'. How can the governing body misunderstand and misrepresent its own sport so badly? How can it be that countries like The Philippines can field a national futsal team, but not England! As I look back at the English game from where I am here in Italy at the moment, I feel isolated and let down. The sacrifices and reasoning that got me where I am seem to have completely misplaced without any transparency or accountability for the defunding. Futsal has benefited from small amounts of public funding, but where is the value of that now? How can Futsal be considered to make the contribution to English Sport and Community that it is so capable of doing if it doesn't even have proper representation? Is the FA holding true to the 'Respect' and inclusivity that are supposed to be its core mission principles?

In 2019 there were some successful futsal events put on at the purpose built futsal arena at St. George's Park. Tickets were sold out while both spectators and players enjoyed some great games. My favourites were the England-Germany games that both ended 2-2. I was really proud to participate and felt we put up a good show.

The key to success in my opinion is steady long term support commitment. It's not about huge sums of money. In fact Futsal is one of the most effective areas at skill development and growing new participation. Exact figures are hard to find, but I believe the current over-all futsal budget has been cut from a recent peak of £900k to below £200k. It isn't clear if income earned from FA Futsal Events was reinvested in futsal, or just absorbed by other FA activities. Something really doesn't make sense if you take into account futsal income from coaching courses and fees which alone could easily amount to over £1M. With no publically available accounts for futsal, it is impossible to know the reality. I have heard The FA claim that they axed futsal due to the Covid pandemic. In the same period and with budgets far far less than The FA's, San Marino has completed a new 1000 seat futsal stadium and The Philippines launched its national team. Spain has continued to invest heavily in its national teams and internationally futsal continues to grow. English youngsters deserve to have the chances I have been so lucky to have. I want to have chance to reinvest what I have learned into English futsal. Our futsal clubs need some help to step up their efforts and encourage replication the best examples.

Futsal needs immediate help to avoid seeing recent progress go to waste and future opportunities pass us by. Futsal has already shown how much can be achieved by so little.

Both Russell and I appreciate the chance to share our points of view and sincerely hope that they can be taken into account and futsal given the direct engagement with sports policy making it so desperately needs.