

Written evidence submitted by Lewes FC

DCMS Committee Inquiry into the 'Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors'.

What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

1. In common with most football clubs, Lewes FC's largest outgoing is on people: players, coaches and office staff. Those costs do not cease simply because there are no matchdays.
2. The immediate financial impact on Lewes FC is more than £120,000 of revenue forgone over the first few months. The actual revenue impact will be greater because we are unable to meet potential future sponsors or financial backers.
3. Clubs have lost substantial amounts of matchday income (ticket sales, catering sales, hospitality, merchandise) and some sponsorship contracts cannot be fulfilled (for example where they may have matchday conditions). The opportunity to engage with potential sponsors has been curtailed, and sponsors are themselves under threat and in some cases, are renegeing on agreements.
4. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme has been a welcome way of covering 80% players' salaries until the point at which a decision is made about whether their leagues will continue.
5. Players whose leagues have been declared null and void (such as is the case for Lewes FC Men in non-league football) have lost a component of their weekly income several weeks earlier than planned.
6. Players whose leagues were suspended for many weeks (such as for Lewes FC Women) faced uncertainty about their future. All normal rules governing transfers and contracts were left uncertain, and this had a knock-on effect on how players can plan their lives.
7. Fifty-eight per-cent of Lewes FC Women's staff and players noted they were at financial risk in spite of furlough arrangements. Many of our semi-professional players at Lewes FC lost their second incomes because they comprise casual work, or work in gyms, or as personal trainers. Their ability to return to work for the new season remains difficult because of having lost those second jobs and the uncertainty about whether they will be available in the future.
8. Thirty-eight percent of the players and staff said they were at immediate risk of contracting COVID-19, because they either are a Frontline worker, or live with a key worker.
9. Sixty two per-cent of the players and staff said they were at risk of trauma through loss, because they are vulnerable or have a loved one who was vulnerable, such as a family member on the front line.
10. Sixty two per-cent identified they experienced a negative psychological impact of isolation due to distance from family, or living alone, or adjustment issues. Semi-

professional players live extremely structured, very demanding lives in order to be able to work and train at the level required.

How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

11. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme has allowed clubs to furlough players and still pay at least 80% of their salaries. This has been incredibly helpful when most other revenue has ceased. This has likely protected some football clubs from entering administration for the time being.
12. A severe pinch-point will come for clubs when seasons start again, players are recalled and will need to be paid whilst there have been zero revenue generating opportunities in the interim. Outgoings will return to normal on the back of several months of limited or zero income.
13. If matches are required to be played behind closed doors, clubs will be under an increased threat of administration, because matchday revenue will remain close to zero, but with outgoings returning to normal.
14. The early move to provide furlough options to clubs was a very welcome move but will have a negligible impact on the longer term sustainability of clubs and leagues unless it can be phased out slowly, rather than removed as soon as players are required to return.

What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

15. There are two possible paths for women's football to take on the back of the pandemic. The first requires a number of stakeholders to realise the opportunity in crisis to reconfigure football, with emphasis on how we invest in and support the women's game to maintain - indeed accelerate - the progress made to date.
16. The second possible path asks that we wait for football "to return to normal" before turning attention to women's football. That path prioritises a standardised return to men's football, followed by women's football as a dependent and secondary activity, requiring no additional central investment or dedicated support. Without investment, women's teams will rely on cross-subsidies, which in turn favours the bigger, richer clubs. This will only increase the resource gap between the clubs who can and the clubs who cannot afford such funding, undoing years of progress and replicating the extreme wealth disparity that is already recognised as problematic in the men's game.
17. This long-term dependency of women's clubs on richer men's clubs rather than the creation of an enabling environment where clubs seek to operate on a more sustainable or equal platform means that smaller, or more independent clubs will suffer, as they will likely experience the lack of matchday and sponsorship income on a deeper level. There will be a disproportionate negative impact on women's football and its ability to carve out its own future as a result.

18. Women's clubs in the top two tiers are currently being required to put in place extremely costly measures to reduce the risk of transmission but without any additional support from the FA or from the government, at the same time that we are being told to plan for no matchday revenue. This is untenable and in sharp contrast to the approach taken in different countries where the COVID costs required to continue women's football clubs were covered by their governing bodies or by four clubs (in the Bundesliga). The Premier League is said to have £1.5 billion in reserves, a portion of which would make a huge impact to the wider footballing family.
19. Whilst difficult to capture, since March, there has been almost zero women's sport on free to view television at a time when audiences were more available to be exposed than ever. Instead, we have seen many multiples of reruns of men's football going back decades. This has been a lost opportunity.

What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

20. We are still in a position where rapid access to survival and recovery funding is vital. We are far from having weathered the storm. Football clubs contribute so much value monetary and otherwise to communities, and rapid recovery support is crucial.
21. There are a number of narratives at the heart of the nation's understanding of sport that even if not intentionally perpetuated by government entities and governing bodies are allowed to gather speed. These narratives make it much harder for women's sport to prosper and will have a negative impact on recovery time.
 - a. First is that the primary objectives of the modern professional game are growth and financial prosperity, and social investment only comes at an unspecified point at which prosperity is achieved.
 - b. Second is that independent market forces run professional sport and nothing can be done to hasten the growth of women's sport. This permits a lack of innovation or effort to try to modify broadcast demand or consumption, and assumes that sponsors and broadcasters themselves are entirely unbiased, and entirely representative of the audiences they purchase and create for.
 - c. Third suggests that there will be trickle down impacts of men's sport being prosperous. However there are many many examples of men's sport being prosperous without the predicted trickle-down effect.
 - d. Fourth demands that women's sport fall into line with the existing rules and paradigms of men's football to survive. It means that rules and requirements can be ill-fitting for women's sport to thrive and accepts a lack of imagination for changing how things are run.
 - e. Fifth is simply that football is apolitical and asocial. It supports an "eat what you kill" mindset and does not question the origin of funds or sponsorship, undervalues diversifying sport to be more representative and make decisions that are more equitable.
22. This means that in the debate about what sport to put on television and which football to prioritise to return, we sideline the role that sport plays in communities and society. We do not recognise the significance of visible female role models. We sideline

values of equity, fairness and leaving no one behind and we stifle the opportunity for further investment that could have been generated, for example, through broadcasting women's football at a time when large viewership would have been guaranteed.

How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

23. Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic require urgency and leadership. There are huge opportunities to reconfigure how we fund, recognise and invest in sport. We lost huge opportunities to increase the visibility of women's sport by not being ambitious and not seeking bold broadcasting opportunities where captive audiences could have become long-lasting fans.
24. DCMS has a key role to play within changing the narrative in the UK's understanding of sport. A number of recommendations for evolving the sport sector to -
 - a. Recognise now that the goal is not to rebuild what we had, but to build something altogether better.
 - b. Ensure genuine diversity in meaningful consultation from all levels of the game and a parity in weight for women on the decision-making body for 'triaging' the game.
 - c. Create the ability for men's and women's football bodies to make decisions that best suit their unique situation instead of women's football being required to fall into line with men's football.
 - d. Build aspirational models and options for helping clubs and leagues work out how not to leave people behind who are less 'economically' productive yet high value in terms of social purpose.
 - e. Preparedness by decision-makers to embed principles (like equity and even-handedness) into the design of rescue and recovery funding and capture gender and age disaggregated data to shape and monitor outbreak responses that can protect everyone.
 - f. Create public narratives / campaigns on the social value of football; what are we missing during these times and why do women make up 50% of that?
 - g. Build the core values (like equity, fairness, care etc) into the design of every initiative by the government to address Covid-19 in sport. For example, every program/payment/resource etc directed to sport should be non-discriminatory, with no-one left behind.
 - h. Support radical new commercial, fan and media propositions built for the women's game that start a sustainable game economy for women's football that does not necessitate reliance on the men's game.
 - i. Support a process to consider more equitable distribution of funds across football including an analysis of the use of Premier League reserves and the distribution of broadcast funds.
 - j. More diverse decision-making bodies through better, more inclusive governance including 50% female leadership in governance across the game - and in key decision-making roles, not simply in diversity or women's committees.

- k. Work towards UK Title IX equivalents across all government entities and all sports funding, applying to all sports entities that receive any government resources, concessions or permissions.
- l. Create sport success metrics that expand beyond money and participation numbers alone to 'living metrics' measuring wealth from human, social, cultural, economic and environmental inputs, from which true value flows and award budgets and grants accordingly

About us

Lewes FC is the first gender equal football club in the UK, splitting its resources equally between its men's and women's teams. The men play in the Isthmian Premier South Division and the women play in the FA Women's Championship. For more information please contact info@lewesfc.com