

Cross Party Working Group: The Future of Scottish Football

17 April 2018

The Scottish Parliament

Minutes

Present: Fulton MacGregor (Convenor), George Adams (MSP), Jeremy Balfour (MSP), Lynn Bertram (Penicuik Athletic YFC), Danny Bisland (Scottish FA), Malcolm Dingwall Smith (Sport Scotland), Brian Forbes (Clackmannanshire Council), Andy Gilchrist (Scottish FA), Andy Gould (Scottish FA), David Hamilton (Scottish Government), Stuart McCaffrey (Scottish Football Partnership), Sheena McCulloch (MSP Staff), Gavin Michie (Scottish Women's Football), Lee-Anne Menzies (MSP Staff), Ann Quinn (Scottish FA), Sandy Riach (SDSA), Alan Russell (Supporters Direct Scotland), Louise Shepherd (Penicuik Athletic YFC), Jim Wilson (Bonnyrigg Rose FC)

Apologies: Iain McMenemy (Stenhousemuir FC), Nicky Reid (SPFL Trust), Calum Beattie (SPFL), Ben Macpherson (MSP), Chief Inspector Chris Scobbie, Paul McNeill (Scottish FA)

1. Welcome and Introduction

Fulton MacGregor MSP opened the meeting and welcomed those present.

2. Minutes and Update from Previous Meeting

The minutes from the previous meeting were proposed by Lee-Anne Menzies and seconded by Sheena McCulloch.

3. Accessing Facilities

Andy Gould opened the presentation by saying that access to facilities was seen as one of the major issues surrounding playing football in Scotland and outlined the support the Scottish FA can offer now in terms of:

- Research
- Facilities Strategy
- Facilities Forum
- Regional Networks

Cammy Watt, Scottish FA Facilities Manager, outlined the challenges faced by football clubs all around Scotland with three of the main ones currently affecting club access to facilities being Local Authority/Leisure Trust financial constraints, limitations of some PPP School Contracts and the inconsistency in approach to Community Asset Transfer (CAT) across local authorities.

Danny Bisland, Scottish FA Big Lottery Project Manager, went on to talk about the project that he is involved with a focus primarily on 3 pilot clubs; Jeanfield Swifts Community Football Club, Bonnyrigg Rose Community Football Club and Annan Athletic. The work carried out included supporting the pilot clubs and many others across the country to undertake business development, community consultation and at times governance changes to ensure the organisations were act compliant. Danny also presented on what the landscape looked like currently for community clubs at all levels of the game in Scotland and in particular what the Community Empowerment Act meant for our clubs. Danny stressed that for many clubs the process of undertaking a full asset transfer is not a primary motivator, instead many would prefer enhanced access at existing sites.

4. Community Clubs Gaining Local Access

Jim Wilson from Bonnyrigg Rose FC gave the group an overview of their Club and the challenges they have faced. Bonnyrigg now has over 500 kids, and also offers over 35 football and over 50 walking football. They have a thriving girls section and over 100 qualified coaches. Biggest change over the last few years is the growth in girls playing and older players; they realised their club needed to be about Community Football for all.

Bonnyrigg started a Kid's Academy and now take in 50 kids per year at 5 years of age which has been a challenge but they were clear they did not want to restrict numbers. Through the work with the Scottish FA as a Legacy club they introduced other activities to the club eg Kick Dancing. However they had issues with the hub and the way it was set up so they engaged in talks with the Council to try and grow the facilities and work better with other stakeholders.

They eventually agreed with the Council to take a lease for the Pavilion and upgraded it. They introduced a nursery in the mornings taking 16 kids and afterschool care. In addition they opened a café at the weekends for parents coming to watch the games. Jim emphasised that there is a value to Councils in releasing these facilities to Community Groups. By doing this they have created 5 new jobs (café and nursery). These initiatives brought the community together and upgraded a facility that was falling into disrepair.

Bonnyrigg also created the role of Community Development Officer and engaged someone to come in and develop the club. This was funded by a small fee being added to the players every month. The role of the Community Development Officer was to engage more with the local community; to get more people in and the idea of focusing on mental health was suggested. They received some funding and used partners to deliver mental health awareness sessions to the coaches. This initiative has opened the club up to the wider community.

Jim talked about all of the other various initiatives that the club have delivered eg Panini style sticker book for the club which sold over 60,000 stickers, they have engaged a pupil from the local school to help with social media. Jim stressed that he doesn't want the smaller clubs to be engulfed by the larger clubs as local kids should play with local kids and he hopes that Bonnyrigg can be a "go to" club for advice and best practice.

Jim believes that facilities are key for clubs and guidance and clarity on CAT would be welcomed. Jim questioned the number of pitches that were being closed in his area and the irony of this given the number of new homes which were being built.

Lynn then gave a presentation from the perspective of their community club, Penicuik Youth Athletic Football Club. Penicuik are also a Legacy Club under the Scottish FA Quality Mark scheme. They were two smaller clubs which merged. They currently have 70 volunteers and no permanent members of staff. They have access to a good facility which belongs to the High School which they use in the evening.

They do have access to another astro pitch but it is 11 years old and in desperate need of repair. It has an open gate policy which Lynn agrees is great for the community and is well used but they do not know how to solve the issue of getting funding to bring this up to standard.

Penicuik have a very good treasurer who has been successful in obtaining funding for the club and their bank balance is healthy. They do engage in community initiatives eg litter picks, helping with the local foodbank etc, midnight leagues and do believe the club is a community hub.

The dilemma is where to go next. They have 33 teams and 1 astro they can use. They do not have a pavilion; just changing rooms at the side of the pitch and portacabins for storage. Like Bonnyrigg they also have large housing developments in their area so only expect the membership of their club to grow. They do not want to turn away kids but cannot see a way forward and looking for investment in the old Astro in order to cater for all.

5. Local Providers Access Challenges

Brian Forbes attended the meeting from Clackmannanshire Council. Brian said that he is from one of the smaller councils so his view may not be the same as those from the larger councils. Brian said a lot of the facilities/land have come from donations in the past; they are simply the custodians of it. He believes Clackmannanshire have a very open view on Community Asset Transfer.

Brian confirmed that they have a sufficient supply of all-weather pitches but there is a bottleneck at times eg Saturday mornings and that they are working with League Managers to try and spread the activity over a longer period. They are receptive to any ideas which would see better use of the facilities in the area.

The quality of provision is an issue with the budget being cut by approximately 25% in Clackmannanshire. This means a reduction in pitch maintenance which is a challenge. Brian confirmed that the Council would like to provide better quality pitches and perhaps need to involve the community more to achieve this.

Brian also believes that CAT is just one option and that there are other options eg leases, try before you buy etc. Clackmannanshire have also built a brand new pitch in Dollar with a direct transfer to a Football Club - and currently have 3 community centres expressing interest in an asset transfer. However the down side of this can sometimes be a limit on the use of the facility by other groups/teams so Brian believes there is a balance to be struck.

Brian also said he felt there was a lack of technical/professional know how within Councils and that was a gap that requires to be filled.

6. General Discussions

Following the presentations Fulton thanked Jim, Lynn and Louise and encouraged discussion amongst the group. Fulton informed the group that he also had enquiries from Community Clubs regarding the Community Empowerment Act and, in particular, Asset Transfer so hopefully as part of this cross party working group, we can standardise the way forward taking on board best practice.

Fulton also agreed with Jim on the value of the Mental Health initiative at Bonnyrigg and reiterated the importance of young people and mental health. Fulton said it was everyone's role to manage mental health so felt that this was a great initiative for the club.

George Adams raised the issue of the length of time it takes Councils to deal with these requests and the delays involved in Community Asset Transfer. He said that there appears to be a patchy response from Councils who also may be struggling with resource in trying to deal with requests. Councils also need to see this as a positive initiative.

Jeremy Balfour said that part of the problem was the silo mentality within councils with departments not engaging fully with other departments. There is also the issue of clubs knowing who to contact in the Council. Jeremy felt that there could be good opportunities but the Council had to let go and engage meaningfully. Jeremy also suggested that there may be capacity for grassroots football to work together to put pressure on councils to release facilities.

Fulton agreed and thought there was merit in all Councils hearing the stories of Bonnyrigg Rose and Penicuik so that they could see that there is something in it for them and that it can be a positive experience.

Jeremy asked if clubs growing in number and becoming community hubs was only unique to Central Scotland and Cammy said that he felt it was nationwide; he had experience of clubs from the Borders to the Islands. Danny also confirmed that his experience was that clubs were recognising they were Community Hubs and the size of some of the Legacy clubs equates to running a small business. Danny also said significant confidence is required by clubs to take over facilities and the same is true on the Local Authority side; they have to have the confidence to hand them over.

Lee-Anne said that in some cases Councils have money earmarked for facilities but are reluctant to spend it; with no agreements in place and questioned how we get that funding released.

Alan Russell asked the clubs if they tried Crowdfunding and both Jim and Lynn said they had not tried this. Jim said they have just started a fundraising committee and they would look at the possibility of this but he felt they were going back to the same people for money.

Stuart McCaffrey said listening to both clubs stories made you realise how incredible our volunteers are. However there appears to be a recurring theme; lack of investment and closing facilities. He believes there is an untold story here and questioned where we were going as a country and where would we be in 10 years' time if we continue to close facilities. He also believes volunteers should not have to bear the burden. We are building more and more new homes yet closing pitches close by. Stuart believes that this could have a massive impact on us in the future.

Jim said it would be good if there was a single point of contact in the Council that clubs could go to. Also that expanding clubs need business advice as those running the club may not have that skillset. Jim also said it was difficult for clubs to get loans if they wanted to purchase facilities and George Adams confirmed that his experience was that banks don't tend to embrace football related projects. Jim did say that Bank of Scotland had engaged with them but that they were nervous. Jim asked if funding for clubs could be sought from Scottish Government at capped interest rates.

Malcolm from Sportscotland said that Community Asset Transfer was not for everyone. There are rules around certain funding whereby it cannot be used for maintenance and repair of facilities. Sometimes it may seem like barriers are being put up however sometimes policy or rules around funding means CAT initiatives cannot be supported.

Lynn informed the meeting that, along with Sportscotland and Scottish Football Partnership, they also received funding from the MOD for their new astro so they were always looking for alternative, innovative solutions to fund.

7. Future Actions

Fulton thanked everyone for their contribution to the meeting and raised the issue of further actions. Andy Gould put forward some actions for the group, namely:

- **Club Development** - to be prioritised/promoted by LA's/Trusts in future service provision plans.
- **Future PPP School Contracts** - must include for 'after school use and enhance service provision' through clearer, tighter contract conditions.
- **Community Empowerment & CAT** - maximising potential, promoting consistency of approach to CAT and better resourced.
- **Football Stakeholder Conference** - bringing partners together to discuss & resolve common issues.

Fulton would like one more round table on this topic as he believes it is crucial for football and that came through in this meeting and previous meetings. He would also like a report compiled on accessibility that could go to all Local Authorities and suggest best practice across the country to avoid the postcode lottery situation which seems to be the case.

George Adams liked the idea of the Football Stakeholder Conference and it was agreed that Fulton MacGregor, Andy Gould and George Adam would liaise with each other to perhaps have this prior to the next Cross Party Working Group meeting on 18 September.

8. Next Meetings

- **Meeting – 18 September**
How can we use football more as a vehicle to deliver against the Scottish Government's strategic objectives?
- **Meeting – 27 November**
Access to the Terraces (a) – how can we help ensure that professional football remains accessible to minority/disadvantaged groups?
- **2019 Meetings**
 - Meeting 4**
Access to Football – how can we help remove barriers for minority/disadvantaged groups to play football?
 - Meeting 5**
Access to the Terraces (b) – how can we improve disabled facilities and services across football stadiums?