



BUTTS PARK ARENA, THE BUTTS, COVENTRY, CV1 3GE

To:

Ms. Zarah Sultana MP (Coventry South)
Ms. Colleen Fletcher MP (Coventry North East)
Ms. Taiwo Owatemi MP (Coventry North West)
Mr. Andy Street (Mayor of the West Midlands)

Cc:

Mr. George Duggins (Leader, Coventry City Council)
Mr. Martin Reeves (CEO, Coventry City Council)

Re: Government support for professional sport at all levels of the pyramid

Dear Madams and Sirs,

I am writing to ask for your support in lobbying the Government to support professional clubs at all levels of the sporting pyramid, and for an in-person meeting to discuss how best we can safeguard the future of Coventry Rugby.

Over the last few days the leaders of various national sporting governing bodies have been well represented in the national press with regard to the impact being faced due to the Government's most recent coronavirus restrictions.

However while it is inevitable that attention will be more on the national governing bodies and the top flights within these sports – Premier League, Premiership Rugby, etc – there is a vast infrastructure of sport which is in serious danger of falling out of existence in its current form, putting hundreds of thousands of jobs at risk and destroying the community engagement projects which have been built up over a considerable period of time.

I have no doubt that right now across the country similar letters are being written to MPs from clubs like Coventry Rugby, who are at the smaller end of the SME turnover bracket, who find finances tight but who are nevertheless viable businesses, but who do not have the relative safety net of substantial league-wide sponsorship and TV broadcast deals to fall back on.

ABOUT COVENTRY RUGBY

After a few years in the doldrums Coventry Rugby has become the city's brightest sporting story, rising from 33rd in the English leagues four years ago to be the 16th best club in the country in 2019/20. This has been achieved through the dedication and commitment of many staff, coaches and players, and the steadfast backing of a growing number of supporters, with attendances having doubled in that time.

Before the pandemic struck we were setting our sights on further improvement on the pitch, developing an Academy to work with clubs from around the city and Warwickshire to give the best young players an opportunity to establish a professional career, and sharing all our expertise to help coaches at those clubs improve themselves.

Our long-term ambition was to have a Premiership-ready club with a team packed full of Coventry born-and-bred players, and to support this with a range of innovative community programmes.

Indeed we had done a lot of work in this area as well, with a Wheelchair Rugby team that had won a national tournament in its first season, the unique Project:500 which gives disadvantaged youngsters week-long activity weeks at Butts Park Arena, and school programmes which delivered more than 2,500 hours of sessions. These are just three examples of what has been achieved in the last year, but like our rugby they will be under threat.

The artificial pitch that we installed at Butts Park Arena this time last year is well used, both by us but also by other significant sports clubs, Coventry Bears Rugby League, Coventry United FC, Coventry United Ladies FC, Coventry University and a host of smaller amateur clubs from across a number of sports as well as schools and our own multi-sport activity camps.

We are not alone, either in rugby or in other sports, as EFL Chairman Rick Parry has highlighted to the BBC.



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This is because the further you go down the pyramid the more reliant clubs are on the very things which have been prohibited by the latest restrictions, namely match day ticket sales, bar and food sales, and other similar forms of cashflow which keep us alive. Yet we are also being expected to maintain our sporting operations to prepare for those very same matches which would bring us the income, while also needing to incur additional costs for testing our players which we will have no opportunity to recoup.

Furthermore, the one-size-fits-all approach taken by the Government with regard to gatherings disregards all the hard work and investment put in at test events, the operational knowledge and expertise within clubs, and seemingly does not trust local authorities to make the appropriate decisions which are right for their particular areas and circumstances.

For example, plenty was written about the likely role played by the Cheltenham Festival and Liverpool's match against Atletico Madrid as super-spreading events at the start of the pandemic. But the majority of sport in this country occurs without such crowd numbers and density, and without significant impact on public transport and pubs/restaurants which can be easily managed – and indeed are currently being managed within the latest guidelines.

Social distancing can be maintained, and our ticketing company has the algorithms in place for us to enact bubbles of no more than six people with appropriate spacing between seats, and with digital ticketing and cashless payments we are already ready to open our doors safely and continue with the next stage in a journey which is nearing 150 years of continuous rugby in the heart of Coventry.

We are seeing elsewhere in Europe that sporting crowds are being allowed, including in France and Spain, which are further along in their 'second wave' than we are here in the UK.

So what support are we asking for?

FINANCIAL

At the start of July the Government announced a £1.57 billion bailout for the arts sector. For a fraction of this cost every professional sports club can be kept alive.

Here at Coventry Rugby £1 million would enable us to maintain all our operations for the next year; extrapolate that across the professional football, rugby, netball, cricket clubs, etc, clubs like us outside the Premier League, Football Championship and Premiership Rugby and the total amounts to around £150 million, one tenth of the value of the arts bailout.

Arts venues received those funds because they are closed with no prospect of opening; we, too, are closed with no short-term prospect of opening, but this funding would also enable us to play matches which could be live streamed for the entertainment of our supporters and the broader public, helping in turn to give people something to look forward to and helping their mental wellbeing.

In addition, this funding would enable us to maintain our community work which delivers thousands of hours of school sessions, engages disadvantaged youngsters in unique projects, develops outstanding young rugby players to give them an opportunity of a career within the sport, and has been expanding into disability sport and other similar areas.

We have tried to help ourselves as much as possible, launching a crowdfunder and as many ways to maintain some cashflow as we could think of, such as pitch hire bookings and Sunday Lunches.

The backing we have received from our supporters and sponsors has been outstanding, with hundreds of Season Tickets renewed and over £36,000 donated through the crowdfunder. But while very welcome this only scratches the surface if we are not able to return to at least some semblance of normal operations.

OPERATIONAL

A massive number of lessons have been learned at a number of test events and club managers across the country have no doubt that matches can be played safely as long as all the preparations are in place.



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So we need the Government to trust the clubs to work with our local safety authorities to put everything in place which is appropriate for us and our areas. Plans would need to take into account impact on transport and other local amenities, and we have no doubt that there would need to be things like staggered departures from the stadium block by block, and we are willing to accommodate them and take the time we need.

Putting it bluntly, we know our individual circumstances better than central Government does, but as we are seeing with many centralised decisions being made in Whitehall the trust just isn't there, and it needs to be.

COMMUNICATION

We need the Government to be reminded that sport in this country is more than just the various England teams and top flight leagues, which have major sponsorship and TV broadcast deals and investment from private finance groups. So we need the DCMS to meet with representatives of each league, who can make the case for their particular circumstances on behalf of their peers.

These meetings need to be happening in the next few weeks so that we can plan effectively for the future.

What happens if we do not receive this?

Putting it simply, Coventry Rugby – and all the other clubs like us across various sports – would be at fundamental risk. We might have to mothball, or – at worst – have to be wound up completely.

The Chancellor has talked about supporting viable businesses. We are all viable businesses which are long-standing pillars of our communities. The Coventry Rugby Foundation has exciting plans built around a framework of getting more people of all ages active and reducing the burden on the NHS and other relevant services.

For Coventry Rugby having to put all of this on ice would make a massive impact across a variety of areas locally. If our example was to be replicated many times across the country – which would happen – it would be nothing short of a tragedy.

I look forward to meeting you in person and hopefully we can count on your support.

With best regards,

Jon Sharp

Executive Chairman, Coventry Rugby