

The Right Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP  
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport  
Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport  
100 Parliament Street  
London SW1A 2BQ  
2<sup>nd</sup> October 2020

Dear Oliver,

We are writing to you today on behalf of three Northern Premier League football clubs, FC United of Manchester, Scarborough Athletic FC and South Shields FC. We operate at step 3 of the Non-League System, the highest level designated as 'grassroots' under current Covid regulations, meaning that we are permitted limited crowds.

We have read with interest over the last couple of weeks the developing situation over the National League clubs who made their case that they were not sustainable if forced to play without fans. A widely publicised letter to you on 28<sup>th</sup> September from MPs and sporting authority figureheads made the case that *'in order for clubs to sustain themselves over the winter and keep playing, they would need to be compensated for the loss of match ticket sales. The absence of this income is not the result of their actions but the policies that have been put in place by the government in response to a public health emergency'*. It would appear that the government has listened to that case with the announcement made to the house on Wednesday by sports minister Nigel Huddleston that a funding package had been agreed *"to help those most impacted by the 1<sup>st</sup> October decision"* and *"will be focused on those most in need and it will be based on the loss of gate receipts."*

We believe that there is a flawed perception that all grassroots football clubs can sustain themselves within the current government restrictions and would agree that this is the case for the vast majority. However we would draw your attention that a one size fits all approach doesn't take into account that there are a handful of clubs caught between a now subsidised elite and the grassroots restrictions which are in danger of forcing us out of existence.

Our three clubs are very different but have in common that we are well run and prior to this once in a lifetime Covid emergency, sustainable businesses which focus beyond football on being at the heart of our local communities. Similarly to the National League clubs we provide numerous youngsters with educational and sporting opportunities through our successful academies and we run wide ranging community projects in our areas. This has included substantial extra support for our communities in response to the current Covid crisis.

The return to football protocols allow for supporters in our grounds in limited numbers well below the levels at which we can be sustainable. Government restrictions allow 600 at our step 3 which is 1071 spectators below the average crowd at South Shields last season, 1068 below FC United's and 401 below Scarborough's. To put it into context, the number of supporters locked out of our grounds by current restrictions, and therefore our lost gate receipt revenue, for South Shields and FC United is greater than the total average crowd last season of 30 National League clubs and for Scarborough this is greater than 3. We would make the point that the situation is unsustainable for our clubs at the current government level of restriction but that is not the end of our problems as some Local authorities are now imposing their own restrictions which go beyond what was decided by the DCMS. On the instructions of their local authority South Shields's capacity is currently cut to 300 and Scarborough have been forced to start the season closed doors.

To compound matters, new regulations brought in last week requiring all food and drink to be purchased and consumed at tables will seriously reduce the food and beverage revenue we also rely on as supporters will no longer be able to take these out on the stands and terraces and we will be restricted to limited seated social club service.

We note with interest your colleague the Sports Minister's response in the Commons that any club in immediate financial distress should alert their sport's governing body, which all 3 of our clubs have repeatedly done through the Northern Premier League since the start of the season, only to be informed yesterday by league chairman Mark Harris that there has been no confirmation of any support for affected clubs below the National League.

We understand that we are only a handful of clubs who have slipped between the cracks of elite and grassroots, but we feel abandoned. We are haemorrhaging more in lost gate receipts, through no fault of our own, than 30 National League clubs who will all receive financial assistance and we lose that revenue match after match, week in week out. We are facing ruin for having business models that rely on high supporter engagement, something which prior to Covid had always been regarded as the way clubs should be run. We would ask you to consider that we are good, sustainable clubs in greater difficulty than many National League clubs. Our clubs matter to us, they matter to our supporters and they matter to our local communities.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide you with detailed financial information to support our request.

Manchester Central MP Lucy Powell is also aware of our situation and has indicated her support and will raise the matter further.

Yours sincerely

Adrian Seddon, Chair of the Board of FC United of Manchester

Geoff Thompson, Chairman of South Shields FC

Trevor Bull, Chairman of Scarborough Athletic FC

Emma Lewell-Buck, MP for South Shields

Robert Goodwill, MP for Scarborough and Whitby

Malcolm Clarke, Chairman of the Football Supporters' Association

CC: Nigel Huddleston MP, Minister for Sport, Tourism and Heritage

Mark Bullingham, Chief Executive, the Football Association