

Ex-Villa chief Purslow among contenders to chair football watchdog

A former chief executive of Aston Villa and Liverpool is a surprise contender to become the inaugural chairman of the government's controversial football watchdog.

Sky News can exclusively reveal that Christian Purslow, who left Villa Park in 2023, is on a three-person shortlist being considered by Whitehall officials to chair the Independent Football Regulator (IFR).

Mr Purslow, an outspoken character who has spent much of his career in sports finance, was this weekend said to be a serious candidate for the job despite having publicly warned about the regulator's proposed remit and its potential impact on the Premier League.

A former commercial chief at Chelsea Football Club, Mr Purslow spent an eventful 16 months in charge at Anfield, spearheading the sale of Liverpool to its current owners following a bitter fight with former principals Tom Hicks and George Gillett.

He joined Aston Villa in 2018 when the club was in its third consecutive season in the Championship, seeing them promoted via the play-offs at the end of that campaign.

It was unclear this weekend how much of the football pyramid would respond to the appointment of a chairman at the regulator who has been so closely associated with top-flight clubs, given ongoing disagreement between the Premier League and English Football League (EFL) about the future distribution of finances.

One ally of Mr Purslow said, though, that his independence was

not in doubt and that his experience of working outside the Premier League would also be valuable if he landed the IFR chairman role.

More from Money



Money blog: 'The more ridiculous the better' – inside the world of extreme day-tripping



Banks 'investing heavily' in digital platforms as payday glitch chaos strikes again



Microsoft is shutting down Skype: What other technologies have become obsolete?

Another senior football figure said Mr Purslow "would be welcomed by the football community as someone who has worked in football, and not as a civil servant or politician".

In the past, Mr Purslow has both welcomed the prospect of further regulatory oversight of the sport, while also warning in a BBC interview in 2021, during his stint at Villa Park: “The Premier League has really always been the source of funding for the rest of football and the danger here is killing the golden goose, if we over-regulate a highly successful and commercial operation.

“I think we have to be very careful as we contemplate reform that it does not ultimately damage the game.

“We already have a hugely successful English football Premier League – the most successful in the world.”

Two years later, however, he told Sky News’ political editor, Beth Rigby: “I like the idea that the government wants to be involved in our national sport.

“These [clubs] are hugely important institutions in their communities, economically and socially – so it’s right that they [the government] are interested.”

The disclosure of Mr Purslow’s candidacy means that two of the three shortlisted contenders for what will rank among the most powerful jobs in English football have now been identified by Sky News.

On Friday, it emerged that Sanjay Bhandari, the chairman of Kick It Out, the football anti-racism charity, was also in the frame for the Manchester-based position, which will pay £130,000-a-year.

A decision is expected in the coming weeks, with the third candidate expected to be a woman given the shift in Whitehall to gender-diverse shortlists for public appointments.

The establishment of the regulator, which was originally conceived by the previous Conservative government in the wake of the furore over the failed European Super League project,

has triggered deep unrest in the sport.

This week, Steve Parish, the influential chairman of Premier League side Crystal Palace, told a sports industry conference organised by the Financial Times that the watchdog “wants to interfere in all of the things we don’t need them to interfere in and help with none of the things we actually need help with”.

“We have a problem that we’re constantly being told that we’re not a business and [that] we’re part of the fabric of communities,” he is reported to have said.

“At the same time, we’re...being treated to the nth degree like a business.”

Interviews for the chair of the football regulator took place in November, with a previous recruitment process curtailed by the calling of last year’s general election.

Lisa Nandy, the culture secretary, will sign off on the appointment of a preferred candidate, with the chosen individual expected to face a pre-appointment hearing in front of the Commons culture, media and sport select committee.

The Football Governance Bill is proceeding through parliament, with its next stage expected in March.

It forms part of a process that represents the most fundamental shake-up in the oversight of English football in the game’s history.

The establishment of the body comes with the top tier of the professional game wracked by civil war, with Abu Dhabi-owned Manchester City at the centre of a number of legal cases over its financial dealings.

The government has dropped a previous stipulation that the regulator should have regard to British foreign and trade policy when determining the appropriateness of a new club

owner.

The IFR will monitor clubs' adherence to rules requiring them to listen to fans' views on issues including ticket pricing, while it may also have oversight of the parachute payments made to clubs in the years after their relegation from the Premier League.

The top flight has issued a statement expressing reservations about the regulator's remit, while the IFR has been broadly welcomed by the English Football League.

A Department for Culture, Media and Sport spokesman said: "We do not comment on speculation.

"No appointment has been made and the recruitment process for [IFR] chair is ongoing."

Mr Purslow was abroad this weekend and did not respond to a request for comment.