

Top women's clubs approve £20m Premier League loan

The Premier League is to inject £20m into elite women's football as part of a deal to accelerate the sport's commercial development.

Sky News has learnt that Women's Super League (WSL) and Championship clubs approved the financing at a meeting on Wednesday, following parallel talks with the Football Association about a similar debt package over recent months.

Club executives said the Premier League loan would be made on an interest-free basis and only repayable when the 'newco' established by the top two divisions had recorded £100m in annual revenue.

The new funding will be used for a variety of purposes as the new commercial entity becomes operational.

Nikki Doucet, the former Nike executive who was appointed as the newco chief executive in November, is said to have ambitious plans to grow women's football at a time when interest is flourishing on the back of the England national team's success.

Negotiations about establishing the new entity were fraught until clubs in the second tier performed an abrupt u-turn days after rejecting plans to set up the company in a dispute over governance rights.

Women's Championship clubs will now be in line to receive 25% of the combined leagues' commercial income – the vast majority of which is generated by the Women's Super League (WSL).

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During a recent select committee hearing, the Premier League chief executive Richard Masters told MPs: “Recently, our clubs agreed that they would make a financial loan to the NewCo that is being set up at the top of the women’s game in the Premier League and have a seat on the board and provide a whole bunch of services to the game such as advice on how to commercially develop the league.

“It still has to be approved by the WSL board, but I hope that is the start of a relationship and the men’s game can help the women’s game in a whole raft of different areas.”

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The WSL has been determined to press ahead with the new structure to enable it to formulate a comprehensive broadcast rights package ahead of a tender process expected to begin shortly.

The WSL is led after 13 games by Chelsea, with Manchester City three points behind.

The division below is led by Charlton Athletic, with other clubs including Sunderland, Watford and Durham.

Last September, Dawn Airey, the media executive who chairs the WSL and Championship, said she had set an ambition of the WSL becoming the world’s first £1bn-revenue women’s competition within a decade.

“That isn’t a figure we just plucked from the air, it is based on a pretty decent and detailed business plan for over the course of the next 10 years,” Ms Airey told the media.

“We look at the growth of attendances, we look at the growth of engagement and broadcast, we look at the increased interest in sponsorship and marketing opportunities, and then we start being more imaginative about what attending a women’s game means. Not just watching the game, but everything that goes on around it, is there potential for clubs to think differently about their revenues?”

England’s victorious Euro 2022 campaign and its narrow defeat to Spain in last year’s Women’s World Cup Final have further fuelled public interest in the sport, with attendances at record levels.

In 2022, the WSL board proposed re-engaging investment bankers

at Rothschild to evaluate other sources of capital to support the sport's growth.

Bridgepoint, a private equity firm which this year approached the England and Wales Cricket Board with a proposal to buy a stake in The Hundred, approached the FA about investing in the WSL in 2020.

Private equity investment is not thought to be under active consideration at this point.

The Premier League and FA declined to comment.