



Swindon & District Football League



## **LEAGUE DEVELOPMENT PLANNING**

### **Swindon & District Football League – Quality Assurance & Development Initiatives**

As part of our ongoing drive to improve both the services we offer clubs and the quality of those services to better meet objectives cascading down from the National & County Football Associations, we set our selves objectives on a season-by-season basis.

As the 2022-23 season draws to a close, we have reviewed progress and can pleasantly & positively report on progress, as follows;

#### **1/Meetings with clubs, FA Officers.**

Our first objective has been continually met, at three levels;

1. Annually, usually in June, we meet, in person<sup>1</sup>, with all clubs to close out the prior season and outline plans for the forthcoming season, this includes rule changes, the introduction/agreement to new clubs and allowing clubs to provide input into events such as cup formats/competitions.
2. On a monthly basis, the leagues Executive Committee meet and minute discussions to do with the ongoing management of the league. The minutes of these meetings are held by the League Secretary, who summarises discussions and key points for distribution to all league clubs via League Bulletins (usually monthly but more frequently as needed, e.g. to cascade any changes from the football authorities)
3. On an ad-hoc basis members of the leagues Executive Committee, meet with the County FA on a variety of topics, this includes regular attendance at Football Services, Respect and Organisational meetings

The League has additionally introduced a 'closed group' Facebook page, and Twitter, to improve the communications with existing District Clubs, players & officials.

#### **2/Links with leagues**

The SDFL has always strived to maintain and improve our links with other Leagues, we believe we have maintained an appropriate level of contact, especially given that the SDFL was a founder member of the Wiltshire Football Pyramid.

For 2023-24, The SDFL strengthened its links with the Wiltshire Senior and Trowbridge adult leagues via team and zoom meetings. These relationships have been expanded with the addition of the Hellenic League, giving almost full coverage across football in Wiltshire. We anticipate building on the foundations in place to the benefit of both leagues, clubs & Wiltshire football, drawing in the County FA where needed, especially given changes in the Football Administration, e.g. more automation/technology drivers.

#### **3/Links with referees**

The SDFL has always strived to maintain and improve our links with referees, and this was supported by the above relationships with other Wiltshire Leagues.

To ensure all middles were covered the RAO's from each League introduced a tiered selection process, where all middles were covered before they were taken by the WSL for their assistants.

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<sup>1</sup> During Covid restricted times, these meetings were virtual, using either MS Teams or Zoom platforms

We have Introduced and successfully operated a Referee Support Group and Buddy Scheme. This strengthened our links with local referees, focussed on referees affiliated with the league. The program was open to all SDFL affiliated referees as well as anyone interested in becoming a referee or just keen to find out more information and how they can get involved.

As part of that, the League was also pleased to offer the opportunity to cover some of the fees associated with official referee courses to try and remove cost as being a blocker to people becoming involved, via a Referee Bursary, with a £50 payment made after 10 games, plus we offer an instalment scheme to support/cover upfront course costs. This and the above support/buddy programmes, help the SDFL maintain its position of supporting and providing opportunities for people to participate in, or to stay involved in, grassroots football, if not or not able to, play..

Applying for a bursary was open to anyone who wished to take a referee course, qualifies as an FA referee and intended to officiate at least 10 games in our league. The league have also expanded the reach of this offer to include those who wish to attend FA courses run not only by Wiltshire FA, but also by Gloucester, Berks and Bucks and Oxfordshire in order to help improve coverage of clubs at the Improve communications with clubs. As an example, one new referee, living at home with his Mother, was helped by the League with the costs of his referee training.

The 2022-23 objectives were achieved with all District games covered, retaining the referees for 2023-24, and getting a few more over the line.

#### **4/Club development**

Help with Club and player development

Due to increased numbers of Reserve and Development Teams joining the league and have introduced rules to ensure limited player swapping, i.e. senior players playing down. The club development for 2023-24 will add the increased Welfare needs, as many of the Development & Reserve teams could include U18 players. In this we will also provide guidance to clubs needing to appoint Welfare Officers and the SDFL is looking to recruit a Welfare overseer to provide that club support, as well as keeping the SDFL in touch with any league requirement.

#### **5/Supporting the Football Pyramid**

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#### **6/Officer Training Culture Objective**

As the administration was now on-line the culture had to change both with the League and our clubs. League's goal to attend more FA workshops, was realised with several of the Management Committee attending FA workshops on Safeguarding, and Team & Player Registrations.

### **SECTION 4**

#### **1/ Safeguarding initiative**

All clubs have been sent the following statement.

All adult (open age) teams will need to ensure all of the requirements are completed in your club portal, otherwise your affiliation will be rejected

All teams that are affiliating as an adult open-age club will need to comply **regardless of if they have under 18's or not at the time of affiliation** and this requirement will be technology driven at the time of attempting to reaffiliate for 2023-24.

Additionally, we are aware that clubs aiming for Football England Accreditation will need to specify a Welfare/Safeguarding Officer and where needed the SDFL has & will provide any guidance possible on appropriate training and interactions with the National & County FA's.

#### **Guidance Given to Clubs** (extracted from FA Comms)

**Question.** Why do I have to do this, we don't have any under 18's in the squad?

**Answer.** The County FA will not be able to manage teams if they decide during the season to sign u18's, they will not have the requirements. So, if they are an open age team, they need to ensure measures are in place from the beginning.

#### **What does this mean?**

**Answer** Team Managers, coaches, etc have to obtain a DBS Check and undergo safeguarding training (online) before they can manage / supervise children playing / training football.

I repeat, these requirements have become part of the affiliation process for adult clubs from next season, meaning that you will be unable to affiliate until you have personnel with the necessary checks and qualifications in place.

In brief, the actions required from both you:

1. The FA have produced a Know Your Rights document, which the League has circulated to you already. It is the responsibility of each Club Secretary to ensure that all 16/17 year old players (who play in adult football) are given a copy.
2. All clubs to adopt and implement the FA / Wiltshire FA Club Safeguarding Children's Policy. All adult clubs to appoint a Welfare Officer. This **was** previously only a mandatory for Youth and Minor clubs.
4. The FA are currently devising an "adult specific" online course for Adult Club Welfare Officers.

I hope that this hasn't come as too much of a shock? The District League also has to write and submit an action plan, more of that to follow in due course.

Welfare officer courses are now fully booked until May and the DBS needs to be completed before the course can be done, so time really is pushing on.

The FA have also made me aware this week that **ALL clubs/teams** will also need to sign a 'safeguarding commitment statement'. This is new to the requirements, and will be sent out shortly with affiliation information by Shane Comb. Again, unless this form is manually signed and returned by each club/team, or they will not be able to affiliate.

If you need anything in relation to the safeguarding requirements, please contact Maria Lai the Designated Safeguarding Officer

#### Monitoring System

Safeguarding policies and procedures have to be implemented by the club.

But the League will monitor (WGS), clubs progress, and will put checks in place.

All incidents, allegations of abuse and complaints must be recorded and clubs should have arrangements in place to monitor compliance with child protection policy.

The clubs Safeguarding policies should be revised ideally at least every three years to accommodate the club's changing needs and experience but also for changes in legislation.

Views of those involved inside and outside the club can be very helpful and therefore clubs should have mechanisms in place to consult children as well as parents, FA and League Officers as part of any review.

Safeguarding children in football is a fundamental part of running a club.

The LSA has the information of each club at their disposal on Whole Game. The League will ensure clubs get the procedures in place before they try to affiliate with the County FA.

The County FA has overall control as they can refuse to sanction a club if it doesn't meet the Safeguarding requirements.

### **Outcome/expectation**

The District League comprises of a number of one man bands, and our concern with this County FA initiative is we may lose clubs that do not want to take on this additional workload.

## **2/ Respect Initiative**

The District Football League are certified as an FA Respect League and we the club officials, our club players and spectators are charged to engage fully with the Respect Campaign and take greater ownership of the Respect Codes.

The Club officials complete form respect001 as part of the Club membership process. They are also signing on behalf of their players. It is the Club Officers responsibility to ensure their players see a copy of the Leagues Respect Codes document.

Regular Respect updates are handled through League Bulletins, twitter, and social media.

Parish Councils are requested to supply spectator lines.

The League RAO checks each team sheet for Respect marks and follows up any disparaging marks and comments.

The League fully supports the FA working group (secret shoppers), where people go out and observe a game of football then complete a report on the game. The SDFL Chair sits on this committee, and at each District League monthly Management Meeting clubs Respect issues are discussed. This is fully supported by evidence from the FA Fair Play league Tables and the RAO feedback from the referee reports.

Discussions are currently taking place at Committee/County Football Services, how we can call in clubs to discuss any reported Respect issues, to bring their behaviour to their attention without charging them.

### **Outcome/expectation**

With 2 representatives on the FA Council, and one on the new working group we will continue to take the initiative forward into 2023-24 and beyond as a pillar of our strategy for football improvement

## **3/ Finding volunteers, succession planning initiative**

Job descriptions that summarise the essential responsibilities, activities, qualifications and skills for a role are already in place. The document describes the type of work the Officer is expected to do.

We have been in-effective so far this season in recruitment, although we have advertised the details for candidates to come forward several times.

The committee currently consists of Chair, League Secretary, & Treasurer, with Officers covering Fixtures, Referees, Registration, Discipline, Matchday admin, and Cups. A total of 8, but with one withdrawing at the end of the season, and another wanting less involvement, we need to recruit by the AGM, certainly by the start of next season.

A couple of Officers cover 2 roles, which isn't ideal. People have very busy lives, a lot working shifts, so by using on-line services like zoom and teams we make it easier for attendance.

We need to enlist 3 more Officers and our priorities for next season will be to enlist a LSA, Discipline, and Treasurer.

Training can be arranged by the committee themselves and the FA resources.

#### **Outcome/expectation**

With additional impetus and a new campaign, we expect to be able to fill these vacancies before the season starts.

#### **4/ Referee recruitment, retention and support**

We currently have a large number of referees committed to supporting our League, mainly due to the diligent work carried out by the League RAO. Our retention has been good.

The District Referee Support Group believes in that extra support on and off the pitch to all Referees in Wiltshire through our Buddy Scheme that is overseen by our Referee Appointments Officer.

We believe the more support offered at the grassroots level will encourage more people to become a referee and stay motivated about refereeing.

Through our programme, we aim to support Referees who think they need that extra support in their career. The group hold regular meetings via "discord" for open and honest discussion amongst their refereeing colleagues.

The District Referee Support Group will aim to support and develop Referees in order for them to reach their own potential, by having an appointed Buddy Mentor is to support and to recognise the strengths and skills they already have and identifying the most important learning needs at each stage of their refereeing journey. Every report will have specific suggestions for each refer as to improvement actions they might want to consider.

We achieve this by the one to one mentoring and recognise that it's important that we as a support group focus on the needs of the individual.

This support extends beyond purely how technically well they did but also covers any impact refereeing may have on them. We are fortunate to have immediate access to Wiltshire FAs Referee Mental Health Champion to support for both on and off field issues that may arise.

Our Buddy Mentors are a group of experienced well respected, volunteers, with a commitment to supporting colleagues at the early stage of their refereeing and all are qualified Referees with 5 years or more experience as an active Referee.

We will continue to offer Bursaries.

We recently completed a costing exercise across the local leagues. District refs receive mileage as well as their fee. Refs are contacted by the home clubs before 7 pm on Thursdays before the match, to discuss facilities, and fees, which are paid in full 30 minutes before the match.

We are happy to share our referee pool with other leagues, in a regulated hierarchy. We recommend that our young inexperienced referees get to do assistant roles in the WSL.

Referee reports are retained by the League with any actions of support requested, or highlighted, and followed up by the RAO.

Referees selected to cover our Cup Finals do so free of charge, (seeing it as an honour), and receive medals to mark the occasion.

The District league offer a guide to clubs when awarding marks for a Referee's overall performance. It is most important that the mark is awarded fairly and not based on isolated incidents or previous games.

#### **Outcome/expectation**

With the effect of these initiatives, we expect our referee numbers again to rise next season, and all matches to be covered.

#### **5 Cost comparison across the Leagues (club sustainability)**

At the last AGM in June 2022 fees and fines were adjusted upwards in line with what other local Leagues were charging. However, with the cost of living, since June, continuing to rise, and feedback from our clubs, the League Management Committee carried out a review of its cash book, and on the basis that inflation has now hit a 40 year high, we reversed most of them and reduced or eliminated some others.

The League recognise that money is becoming tight. It is getting more and more difficult to raise funds, and to attract sponsors, for both League and clubs alike. Clubs are mainly relying on revenue from their players, to keep afloat.

The new prices published across the board now make us lower than the Wiltshire Senior Division 1, and Hellenic Division 2, both feeder Leagues to Step 7 (within our area), without the additional traveling costs too. Offering good value to our clubs, we think the use of *sustainability sets us apart from the other* Leagues. When prices start to stabilise we will rethink our strategy for the following season.

#### **Outcome/expectation**

The outcomes of these changes to fees and fines, won't be known until affiliations are completed, and the effect of other factors (i.e. mandatory child welfare legislation), and growth of the additional feeder Leagues.

#### **Conclusion**

The SDFL believes it has, is and will be active in the key areas supporting grassroots football, as part of that, we believe that our role is both to be a leader & pathfinder for clubs to be able to play football.

We will continue to develop on that stance, adapting & adopting to changes that are cascaded down for the National and County FA's, and being the catalyst for ensuring the key messages are both delivered to and understood by our clubs.

Re-enforcing this is our continued desire to become a Football England Accredited league, our key restriction in that is meeting the threshold of clubs that have achieved that accolade. In this, given we have Committee members that have club responsibilities, as well as league ones, so they can provide necessary guidance to getting clubs accredited.