

FA Meeting to Discuss Restructuring – Leicester, 29 January

This was the third of four consultative meetings with clubs at step 5 about the possibility of reducing the number of step 5 leagues to 12 on the basis that there are six divisions at step 4 and, therefore, 12 promotion places available.

Apparently, there was a suggestion a couple of years ago that, since there were more leagues in the Ryman area than the others, the problem could be solved by relegating three from both of its divisions. They were not initially opposed but, in the end, the step 4 leagues felt that it would be wrong if different numbers were relegated from different leagues.

It was also asked if it was really a problem since "there were never 14 qualifying clubs wanting to go up". In fact, a club was recently denied promotion because there wasn't room rather than on ground grading issues (admittedly a second placed club but still denied on non-footballing grounds).

There are currently 287 clubs at step 5. However, the FA felt that because all step 5 grounds will have to have an F grading, the eventual total will be less. This is slightly odd since clubs are already supposed to have F grading. The two changes that might make a difference are that currently clubs have a year to get up to that level if they are promoted and that allowance would go and that currently the leagues administer the grading individually and inconsistently and, in future, there would be FA involvement in the process to ensure consistency.

Be that as it may, the FA have drawn up a possible allocation (repeatedly emphasised as for illustration only) of the current 287 to twelve leagues with the thought that the number would be reduced to 264 over time by having one extra relegation place per season as required.

Although these allocations are simply an example, the reality is that, if you start building the leagues from the ends of the country, then there is little flexibility except at the margins.

The meeting was dominated by clubs from the UCL and Eastern Counties League with a few from the Midlands Football Alliance. They were overwhelmingly hostile to the proposals, which clearly shocked the FA since the first two meetings (Thurrock and Leeds) had been overwhelmingly in favour.

They shouldn't really have been surprised because the main concern was travelling distance/time. Obviously moving from 14 to 12 leagues has to increase travelling overall but, for SE clubs and northern clubs, the proposals have far less effect.

For instance, in the illustration, Aylesbury United would have two more trips – losing our longest by time (Haringey Borough) and a relatively local one (Holmer Green) and gaining clubssimilar to existing journeys (Enfield 1893, Kempston), a less bad London journey (Wembley) and another Buckinghamshire club (Newport Pagnell). On the other hand a Lincolnshire club currently only have two journeys over an hour each way but would get two of over three hours and 6 over two. A massive increase in travel costs – possibly critical to the viability to clubs who only pay expenses. A number of clubs

reported that, if they got promoted from their example league to step 4, then they would actually travel less, which is clearly bizarre.

The favoured solution for most of these folk was to tackle what they perceived as the real anomaly, which is at step 3, where a true pyramid would have 4 leagues rather than 3. If a 4th [Midland] league were created, then there would be 8 at step 4 and step 5 would have to **increase** from 14 to 16 reducing traveling at all three steps. A significant number of Step 5 clubs would have to move to Step 4. That would be no bad thing for ambitious clubs (of which our league has quite a few) and, because Step 4 would have less travelling too, more clubs would be financially able to cope with that promotion.

The main point that I had wanted to make at the meeting was that the move to 12 should be used to increase promotion from one place to two. There are even two promotion places from step 1 to the football league and the low level of promotion places at 5 to 4 is an anomaly that should be removed.

It was rather difficult to say that in a room full of people who were concerned that they could not afford the new Step 5, let alone promotion. So, I supported the 16 leagues and change at step 3 proposal saying that I understood that for some clubs – particularly in out-lying areas such as Lincolnshire and Norfolk - the major concern was cost control and that those clubs needed to be protected but that they needed to recognise that ambitious clubs that wanted promotion should have their ambition supported too. “Two up” is really important to us. The 16 league option best fits the needs of both.

The other main issue raised was certainty. Clubs at the edges of the example leagues felt that the fact that they might be moved across leagues from season to season would affect player availability and team building.

I have no strong view on this but can see that a Lincolnshire club on the borders of the UCL and Northern Counties East who have recruited Peterborough based players because most of their away fixtures involve travelling through that town, would be concerned about switching to a league where the teams are mainly from Yorkshire.

There was a strong view that league boundaries should be fixed and if this sometimes meant having a team to many or one too few, then so be it.

The final decision is for the FA Council and needs to be taken by their summer (July/August) meeting for implementation in season 13/14. Given that half the FA Committee looking at all this are officials of step 4 leagues, I don't see the step 3 proposal getting anywhere and, if they do decide to look at it, I would guess that that would defer the whole process by a year.

Body language suggested that they understood the “two promotion places” point but their clubs may not buy it. The FA did say, presumably with these leagues' approval, that they were looking at enforced relegation for the bottom club at step 4 even if two other clubs resigned/went out of business. They accept that the competition is not enhanced by having the same club struggling for years.

The whole thing may fall by the wayside. I suspect that the Yeovil meeting will be critical. If that is strongly against, the FA may well say “enough is enough” and go back

to sleep. If it is in favour, then the principle will probably be pressed on with. I would then expect a review of the position of the Midland, Lincolnshire and East Anglian Clubs. We were promised further consultation (but not necessarily a meeting) on any changes.

Alan Sherwell
30 Jan 2012