

Project South West – Proposal

This paper forms the basis for the Proposal, jointly put forward to, and accepted by The FA Leagues Committee who have since “Supported the Proposal in Principle”

The proposal is to merge the South West Peninsula League (‘SWP’) with the Western League (‘WL’) and establish a new Step 5 Division creating a new League comprising two divisions at step 5 and three at step 6. Officials of both leagues have held amicable preliminary discussions and it should be emphasised that a merger of equals is proposed, not a takeover of one by the other.

Introduction

Football in the South West of England faced a significant change following the implementation of the National League System (‘NLS’) restructure in the summer of 2021. As a result, the SWP and the WL established a common goal to improve the situation created by the implementation. This proposal will detail and demonstrate the common approach agreed by officials of both leagues to ensure that the adopted model for the future of football in the Southwest of England is both achievable and sustainable.

When the FA implemented the restructure of the NLS both the SWP and WL were supportive in that they clearly understood the need to enable the Cornish Clubs the same rights as any other Step 5 Club, in their desire to be part of the NLS with the promise of potential future promotion. The formation of the hierarchical pyramid made sense, but it was apparent that the Step 5 footprint had drastically expanded imposing a severe financial penalty on some WL clubs as indicated by the almost 50% increase in club travel distance with the associated cost increase, the worst case was 2,800 annual miles compared to previous 1,700 annual miles. Whilst immediately accepted by most member clubs, the current model is considered questionable over the longer term.

Background

The Step 5 model has previously been attempted in the South West but with limited success. Cornish teams previously joined the WL Premier Division only to withdraw after several seasons due to the costs of travel within a very similar footprint that has been created. Also, clubs have refused promotion to the WL because of projected travel costs.

The current structure includes one step 5 division of the WL comprising 19 clubs whose current footprint extends from the Northeast suburbs of Bristol to Mousehole in the far west of Cornwall. This entails round trips in excess of 400 miles.

At step 6 there are currently three divisions. The SWP comprises two divisions with a footprint covering Devon (East, 20 clubs¹) and Cornwall (West, 17 clubs as one resigned before season started). The WL step 6 division comprises 21 clubs with a footprint including South Gloucestershire, Somerset, Wiltshire and Dorset. The SWP and WL currently have their own Boards of Directors, governance, and finance arrangements.

Objectives

The prime objective is to create a cost effective, sustainable and environmentally friendly structure for Step 5/6 football in the Southwest.

The recent NLS restructure was a step forward but has in turn created challenges in terms of distance and cost which may not be sustainable thereby threatening club and player participation in future. The proposed new structure addresses these concerns which it is believed will lead to an improvement in standards both on and off the pitch as player retention and recruitment progress and funds saved in a reduction of travel costs can be directed into improvement of facilities. A chart showing current and projected mileage within the leagues is attached at Annex A.

Officials of both Leagues accept the principle that reasonable travel is an element of playing football at this level however there is increasing awareness of the environmental impacts of their activities as well as the financial costs. Whilst we cannot ascertain the precise reduction in Co2 emissions, it follows that a significant reduction in travel must bring about a reduction.

Administration will be centralised resulting in greater consistency of approach, application of rules and cost efficiency.

Future structure

The SWP & TWL should combine into a new League Structure, rationalising costs and administration procedures to operate two Step 5 and three Step 6 Divisions by creating an additional Step 5 Division which would “ideally” require a total of 100 clubs (5 x 20 clubs per division). This number is however considered impractical and too disruptive at the outset, so the proposal has been amended to a model of 18 clubs per division (requiring a total of 90 clubs).

Start 2021/22		Proposed 18 Club Division 23/24
WL Step 5 (19)		Step 5 North
		Step 5 South
WL Step 6 (21)		
SWP Step 6 East (20)		Step 6 East
SWP Step 6 West (18)		Step 6 Central
		Step 6 West
Total number of Clubs	78	90

The name of the new league has yet to be discussed and agreed.

The two Step 5 leagues would create a new footprint with the North Division covering Bristol and its environs, Somerset, and depending on locations of eligible clubs, parts of East Devon and West Dorset with the South Division covering Devon and Cornwall and subject to location of eligible clubs South Somerset and West Dorset., as the attached maps show (Annex B) there would be a degree of flexibility to cover future promotion, relegation, and lateral movement. A key determinant in establishing boundaries will be travel distances, an average of less than 160 miles per game should be a maximum for Step 5 clubs and less than 100 miles per game for Step 6 clubs are proposed but some flexibility will be required as the league evolves over time. The environmental and cost aspects of a reduction in travelling of

up to 50% for some Step 5 and Step 6 individual journeys cannot be understated but it is acknowledged that an element of this will be offset by the increase club mileage for some of the Step 6 West division.

To achieve this new structure requires the recruitment of up to a further 12 clubs. This would be achieved by way of promotion from Step 6, relegation from step 4 and some degree of lateral movement in the North and East of the territory, fully dependant of the situation when the transition is made. The vacancies at Step 6 would be filled by way of promotion from feeder leagues across the Southwest together with relegation from Step 5. Whilst the geography of the Step 6 leagues remains broadly similar there is an opportunity to rationalise numbers to 18 in each league making 54 clubs in all, currently the three Divisions have upto 60 clubs.

Looking to the future, a few options exist to determine the means of promotion from the new Step 5 divisions to Step 4. These might include end of season play offs prior to the NLS playoffs or an agreed rule change in line with the current NLS for the SWP Step 6 Divisions. Further detailed discussions have since taken place and would be subject to the FA Leagues Committee agreeing and altering, where necessary, the NLS Regulations.

A centralised administration function will be established using models already in existence elsewhere.

Officials of both leagues believe that this new structure will create a cost effective, sustainable, and a greener environment for step 5/6 football across this geographically diverse and extended region.

It is hoped to have the new structure in place for the commencement of season 2023/24 following a season of transition during 2022/23.

Financial

Latest audited accounts for both SWPL and WL show a healthy position at both and there has been no material change. WL sponsorship is due for review by 2023 and it is considered that sponsorship at or around existing levels will be required to maintain current levels of club support such as provision of footballs. This is reflected in projections prepared for management that show continuation of a healthy cash surplus for the new league in the initial years of operation.

It is important to note at this initial stage that no material impact on individual club finances is envisaged. In many cases reduced travelling overheads should bring about lower costs.

Stakeholder management and communication

The following stakeholders have been identified; all are of equal importance:

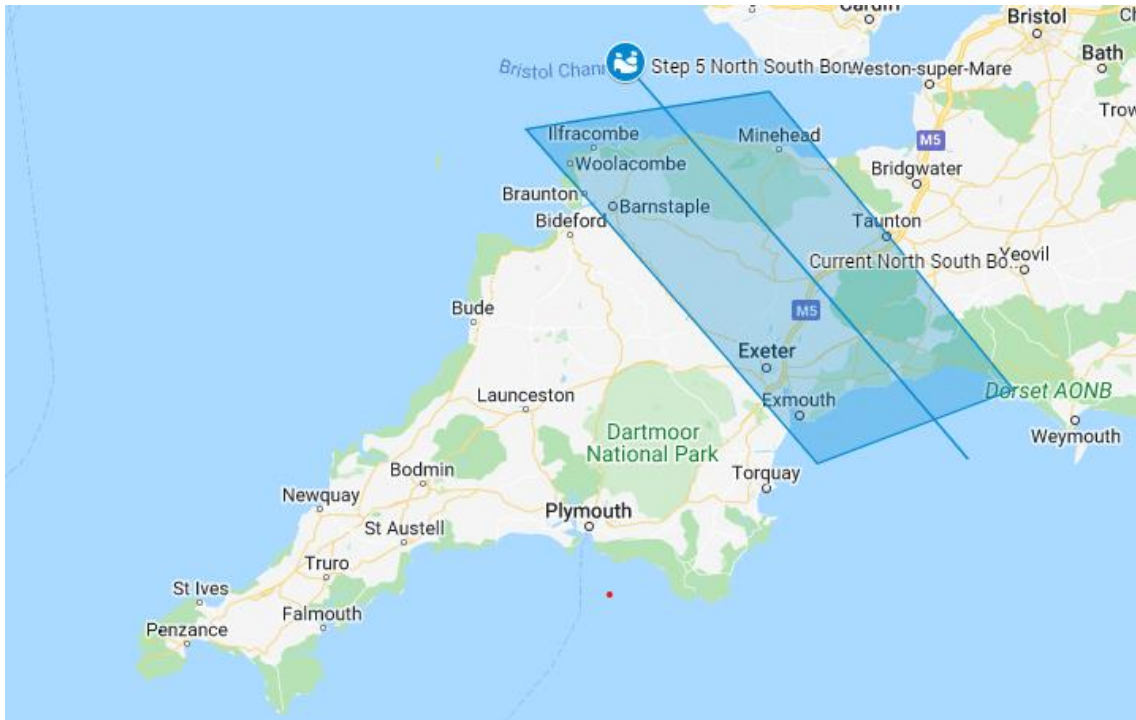
- The FA
- County Football Associations
- The Boards of the SWP and WL
- Current member clubs
- Neighbouring and feeder leagues
- Sponsors

Their needs and concerns will be fully embraced as the project develops. A communication strategy using professional support will be developed to maintain transparency and avoid misinformation and rumour.

Next steps

Now that the proposal is accepted in principle, by the FA Leagues Committee, work will commence to identify specific work streams and the individuals with appropriate skills to deliver these. An early step will be face to face consultation with clubs involving officers of the two existing leagues and The FA. Feedback from these will be incorporated into the project going forward.

Preferred Option Step 5 Footprint – the block area to show the potential geographical edge of each division where teams could be expected to move laterally if required



Preferred Option Step 6 Footprint - 2 block areas to show the potential geographical edge of each division where teams could be expected to move laterally if required

