



## THE GAMEPLAN FOR GROWTH

The FA's strategy for women's and girls' football: 2017-2020

### THE GAMEPLAN FOR GROWTH – THE JOURNEY TO DOUBLE PARTICIPATION

Over the next six weeks, The FA will review the impact of *The Gameplan for Growth* strategy on the women's and girls' game. Launched in March 2017, the strategy pledged to tackle ambitious targets to double participation [by doubling the number of affiliated teams], double the game's fanbase and create a high-performance system and world-class talent pipeline for England teams to achieve consistent success on the world stage. After four seasons the strategy is now concluding, and The FA will outline its continued support for the sport with the launch of the women and girls' strategy in the coming months.

Over the next six weeks you will hear from individuals who have been integral to the strategy's success as we review the strategy's impact across participation, fanbase, coaching, refereeing, England teams and the professional game.

This week's focus is on The FA's journey to double participation, growing from 6,000 affiliated teams to over 12,500 affiliated teams, mini-soccer groups and adult recreational groups over the breadth of the country in 2020.

Please find below the results, a first-person narrative from Louise Gear [The FA's Head of Women's Football Development] and the story of three different case studies who have flourished during the duration of the strategy.

#### **RESULTS:**

- 3.4m women and girls playing football
- 9,251 affiliated teams, 54% increase from 2016
- 1,621 Wildcats centres established across the country an increase of 715% from 2017
- 2,000 *Shooting Stars inspired by Disney* programmes attended by 18,000 girls in Primary Schools
- Over 100 *Girls' Football Schools Partnerships - supported by Barclays* created and reaching over 6,000 schools
- 147 *Just Play* centres for adults introduced in 2019/20
- 88 Community Club Organisations providing opportunities for 55,800 women and girls

#### **FA NARRATIVE by Louise Gear, Head of Women's Football Development**

"After 17 years at the Youth Sport Trust, I joined The FA in November 2017 with the exciting but slightly daunting 'double participation of the women's and girls' game' by doubling the number of affiliated teams by 2020 in my job description.

Being sports mad, still playing netball (having played internationally for England) and having children with a relentless thirst for sport, I know the importance of participation across different age groups and the benefits that formal or informal play can bring. If it is being part of a team or an informal run-around with friends, sport is a fundamental way to enrich life.

Change had to be sustainable, breaking down barriers to encourage new women and girls to play football, whilst retaining and valuing the thousands of existing participants. The plan we built was based around four pillars – places, programmes, people and profile.

If more women and girls are playing the game, then they need **places** to play. Easy to say but much harder to execute and providing more places to experience football has been our top priority. Crucially that has been achieved by building an infrastructure of *Wildcats* centres for 5 to 11 year old girls and *Just Play* centres for adults. That infrastructure has been integral to the growth of competitive female teams, from 6,000 [the strategy's baseline] to 9,251. With the inclusion of *Wildcats* and *Just Play* centres that's over 12,500 affiliated teams, mini-soccer groups and adult recreational groups playing across the breadth of the country, fulfilling our 2020 target to 'double participation'. The impact that they are all having on physical and mental health and wellbeing and the joy they are bringing to their communities is probably one of our proudest achievements.

Creating innovative **programmes** that match women and girl's motivations to play has been a gamechanger, ensuring we have got the flexibility for football to be played for competition, fun, excellence or to learn. *Wildcats* has given nearly 34,000 young girls in 1,621 locations across the country the confidence to give football a go for the first time, allowing them to learn new life skills and form new friendships groups in the process. 18,000 primary school girls have enjoyed *The FA Shooting Stars inspired by Disney* programme over the past two years. Football with a *Guardians of the Galaxy* or *Aladdin* theme has given our sport a unique Disney twist and proved popular in the primary school playground.

These achievements are not possible without **people**, so building a diverse workforce of enablers to grow the game and create female friendly environments has been vital. This year we launched the first *Women and Girls Officer Programme*, providing professional development to a collective of 78 specialists from CFAs, Club Community Trusts and national organisations. Over 143 community clubs have received 'female-friendly' club training, to help build a genuinely inclusive club environment for women to enjoy. The future of women's football development is also encouraging, with 37 women's football apprentices trained over the course of *The Gameplan for Growth*.

Our plan has needed us to not only build an infrastructure but to increase the **profile**, changing the perceptions and breaking down the historical barriers that have been detrimental to the women and girls' game. Avoiding clumsy stereotypes, we have presented the game in a way that it appeals to the female audience. We have worked to encourage the 'see it, play it' mantra across all age groups and formats of the game. This was best demonstrated during the *Lionesses'* run to the FIFA Women's World Cup Semi-Finals, where women of all ages and abilities were inspired to follow in our *Lionesses'* footsteps and get outside and play.

Most pleasingly to me, football for all has been a key mantra for the last three years. Using football as a tool for community integration, we have formed new partnerships with Cerebral Palsy Sport, The Wheelchair Football Association and Amnesty International UK. Alongside a unique partnership with Football Beyond Borders, which has seen BAME young role models encouraging new girls to the game.

Attention now turns to the future, and we'll be increasing our influence in schools, colleges and universities with national partners, Youth Sport Trust, Association of Colleges and BUCS. More details will be in the newly formed women's football strategy, which will be launched at the start of the season.

Finally, a big thank you. Thank you to the hundreds and thousands of new participants, whether you have experienced the joys of football in a weekly kickabout with friends in the park, a Saturday morning Wildcats session or with a new team. You are now on a journey which will hopefully see football become a crucial part of your life. For the thousands of participants who have remained with us, thank you for your ongoing enthusiasm and dedication. Thank you to our partners Disney, Barclays, Snickers, Nike and BT who have supported us. I reserve my biggest thank you to the women's football workforce and thousands of volunteers, without you we would be staring at empty pitches and unused kit – none of this would be possible."

## **CASE STUDIES**

### **Adult Recreational Case Study - Canterbury Old Bags United**

"**Canterbury Old Bags United** started as I was looking for a kick around and wanted to give older women the chance to join me. Over the last three years we have grown the club and now have over 70 women aged between 24 and 60 involved at some level.

In 2017 when I was studying for my FA Level 1 coaching badge, I decided to upload a Facebook post on the local residents' group asking if any women aged over 30 would be keen on joining a football club. I was inundated with replies, and at the first session, we had 24 women aged over 30 join us. From that moment, we were up and running.

Due to the mixed levels of ability of the players, we began a Thursday night session where women aged over 35 including many of whom had never kicked a ball and didn't know the rules, could join us for a run-around, a bit of fitness and socialise with others. Friday night sessions were organised to focus on those who were younger, more experienced and wanted to improve their ability.

Two years later in 2019 alongside the Crawley Old Girls, we organised the *Old Girls' World Cup* in France to coincide with the Women's World Cup and arranged for 250 women over the age of 30 from England, Wales, France and the USA to join us for a one of a kind tournament. We all descended on a stadium near Paris, and although the USA were crowned winners, it was one of the best experiences we have had. It was a real pinch-me moment when I looked around and saw players aged between 30 to over 60 join us to play a game we all love.

When I first started this club, I felt I was judged when I said that I played football on a Thursday evening. I wasn't the only one; some players used to tell me they would be embarrassed about wearing their training kit on the way home. Now, perceptions have changed, the players now feel comfortable wearing their kit home, and I feel immense pride when I say Thursday nights are my football nights.

There are many reasons I enjoy running **Canterbury Old Bags United**, but it's the teamwork, the socialising, the camaraderie and knowing we are getting people out of their homes and active that makes it worthwhile. Since starting, I've had a considerable number of members who said they were lonely and suffered from their mental health, but the club has given them a new perspective on life, and they feel part of a family. Football really can be such a power for good, and I'm delighted that I am bringing a community together through this beautiful game."

**Jo Treharne, Founder, Manager and Coach, Canterbury Old Bags United**

### Affiliated Team Case Study - Lymm Rovers FC

"When I took over as Chairman in 2014, **Lymm Rovers FC** only ran one female 5-a-side team. At this point, we had interest from 14 teenage girls who wanted to play football but had been refused entry to boys' teams in the area. We wanted to create a welcoming environment for all females to play, so we decided to create a Girls' Academy.

The Girls' Academy started with the belief and mantra that no one should be judged, and people should enjoy learning the art and skill of football. The word soon spread, and we had girls arriving aged from 5 to 13 wanting to join the team. We made the decision that no one was turned away. Eventually, we had 60 girls across three teams, and our journey began.

Our next project was the creation of a mothers' football team which began in the 2015/2016 season. Each week we were joined by 15 women aiming to improve their mental health, fitness and football skills. By 2016/2017 participation in the team had more than doubled to 35 women attending, with many stating their mental health and wellbeing had improved significantly since joining, something we are incredibly proud of.

At this time we demonstrated our commitment to growing our club by teaming up with the Cheshire FA. We developed a Young Leaders Programme to ensure our players could follow pathways in football, whether it is a career in coaching, refereeing or pursuing their dream of becoming a professional footballer.

The club continued to grow, and three of our Under 18 female players were selected to play in the Under 18's male youth teams – a first for league and County FA. This resulted in us being recognised for our inclusiveness with the *Outstanding Club Award* from the league.

Throughout 2018/2019 we saw our number of participants double. In the traditional 'drop-off' age groups of U14-18, we were able to provide two teams which were a massive achievement for us and ensured all girls were given a chance to play competitively.

We showed our solidarity to the women's game by rebranding our club to '**ONE CLUB, ONE SEASON**'. Every male and female team wore the same match day and training kit, giving equal prominence and opportunities to play.

One of my proudest moments was last year at our female U15 County Cup game where we had four of our male teams, parents and players watching and cheering on the team to success. At that moment, it felt we had achieved our 'One Club' mantra.

This season has been exceptional, and we continue to grow. We now have 200 females involved ranging from age 5 to 72. With 25 male teams and 25 female teams, **Lymm Rovers FC** truly is *one club*."

**Gavin Laidlaw, Chairman, Lymm Rovers FC**

### Wildcats Case Study - Buckhurst Hill FC Lionesses

"As club secretary of Buckhurst Hill FC and a father of two daughters, three years ago I realised the girls who were training as part of our boys' group deserved their own team. After advertising locally and working with coaches and parents, we set up the **Buckhurst Hill FC Lionesses**. We were made aware by the Essex County FA that we could sign up to The FA's *Wildcats* programme where we would receive extra funding, coaching and marketing guidance and essential kit like footballs and bibs.

We kicked off our first *Wildcats* session with 15 girls aged between 5-11. The group mainly consisted of friends of my daughters, or sisters from our existing boys' teams. Week by week, we saw an increase in attendance, and with that, the level of support from parents, coaches and schools in the area grew.

It was essential for us to ensure girls taking part in our sessions were also encouraged to play football at school, so we worked with local Primary Schools to promote girls-only sessions. We also contacted a local school sports partnership and offered to hold a Girls Primary School tournament where we were joined by five local schools who each brought along one or two teams. As part of the *Wildcats* initiative, the event was supported by Essex FA coaches.

As our centre grew and the girls' competitiveness increased, we wanted to give the girls an end game in the form of matches and to unite them as a team. As part of the setup, we were joined by dads who had been involved in football for many years and now help coach different age groups, manage teams and organise friendlies for the club.

In 2019 we were invited to the SSE Women's FA Cup Final and to take part in the *Wildcats* Parade around the pitch. A trip to Wembley to watch their role models in front of 40,000 fans, showed the girls how big their sport was and what they could be doing when they're older. As I was walking towards the stadium with 40 very excited players, I felt a huge sense of pride and achievement. The club had come a long way, and football and the friendships they formed through it had become a big part of the girls' lives.

Three years down the line from the initial decision to form Buckhurst Hill FC Lionesses, come rain or shine we have an average of 65 girls at training each week and the level of support from coaches, schools and parents have been incredible. After a weekly Friday night session, there is no better feeling than seeing the smile on the girls faces and their excitement for the following Friday.

I can't wait to see the game grow even more in the next three years."

**Craig Sherrin, Club Secretary, Buckhurst Hill FC**