



# JUMPING THE GAP

YOUTH TO ADULT FOOTBALL





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THE FA HAS

# 3

## KEY TACTICS TO SUPPORT ADULT GRASS ROOTS FOOTBALL;

### 1. Retain

Support the existing providers  
– leagues, clubs and volunteers

### 2. Transitional Support

Assist young people move from youth to  
adult football & recognise the increased  
numbers of young people now in further  
and higher education

### 3. Promote Flexibility in provision

Encourage an increasing range of opportunities  
to play - may differ in format, location,  
day of the week, Vets, U18, U21, floodlit,  
central venue, seasonality, length of games,  
ease of administration

It has long been acknowledged that moving young people from a youth environment to an adult competition is a challenge for all sport.

**In football the need for transitional support is underlined by the fact that young people's participation in football halves from 52% of the population in the 13–15 age range to 26% when they are 17–18.**

The challenge for The FA is that some of this drop off is for very plausible 'life' reasons – starting work, university, socialising and end of parental support – but if a greater proportion of these young people can be retained in the game then adult football would be much healthier.

The FA surveyed over 120 leagues that are currently providing U18 or U21 divisions for their experience in order to identify a body of good practice that might convince other youth or adult leagues to review how they look to keep players over the age of 16 playing into their adult years.



## THE CHALLENGES

We first of all asked leagues to identify the challenges they faced in providing football for teams once they reach the age of 16;

*'I think the main problem is that the lads go off to college and the official who runs the team in the youth teams either pack it in or take on another youth team so there is no one to run them.'*

*"Keeping them when they discover women and drink'."*

*"The club problem is very often finance and management. The cost for an Open Age team is considerably more e.g. pitch fee increase by 100% in this area."*

*"Poor working relationships – we have found that adult leagues are a closed shop and do not want to work with us and expect youth players just to come to them without putting out a helping hand/sign post."*

*"Very often the management are persons who took the role on as their child was playing. By the time the player reaches 16 they could well have been running the team 8 years plus. Very often the management have just had enough."*

*"Finding referees with sufficient experience to referee U18 games and making sure that we have grounds available every Sunday."*

Given these factors it can therefore be challenging to run and sustain U18 or U21 leagues and the consistent feedback from existing organisers is to recognise and anticipate these specific difficulties in the organisation of the competition.

## WHAT'S NEEDED?

The starting point for providing for U18 or U21 players is what's required in the area? What already exists, how well do players and teams move through into open age football already. This should involve a conversation with other adjoining leagues – both adult and youth, interested clubs and the County Football Association. The final decision should be based upon what's right for football and the players rather than what's best for a specific league. In some cases this has resulted in competitions that target U19, U20 or even U23 teams.

## IT'S GOOD TO TALK?

Whilst many adult leagues claim to have a relationship with nearby youth leagues and vice versa – how good is this relationship? Does it just mean that details are passed on if an enquiry is made or do league officials ever



actually meet and talk? Does an Open Age League have an opportunity to address U16 or U18 teams that may have an interest in progressing to Open Age football? There are examples of adult leagues inviting 'colt teams' to enter their cup competitions or organising pre-season tournaments that allow youth teams to gain experience of playing against older players.

*"We have an annual meeting between our U16s and two adult leagues."*

**Norfolk and Suffolk Youth League**

*"Both the League Chairman and I hold regular meetings with the Youth Leagues in the County to assist in joining open age football."*

**Staffordshire County League**

*"We have a very close relationship with the WRCWL. Each year they come to our March meeting and speak with all the clubs who could move into the adult game, this includes teams from U16s up. The clubs are taken through the process and what they should be doing to be successful in the women's game."*

**West Riding Girls League**

*Make it personal! Do the telephone calls, talk to prospective managers, visit personally – e-mails get lost in the huge amount of 'junk'. Make it interesting, and get youngsters involved. Not old guard!*

**Hampshire Women and Girls League**

## FAMILIARITY IS FINE

Some youth teams given the choice would prefer to stay with an existing youth league offering an older age group competition than risk the uncertainty of entering an adult league.

*"Cradle to Grave provision – Provides football from Juniors to – U17, U18, U19 and then open age and vets Divisions. Open Age and U17s & 19s can chose their kick off time for HOME games PRIOR to the season commencing. Either 10.30am or 2.00pm. The only dispensation given is to those teams who hire 3G pitches who very often cannot get the times as detailed above. The main reason being that we offer everything to our clubs so they don't have to finish playing with us and then go and find a League to play in."*

**Tameside League**



## IT'S NOT A 38 GAME SEASON

Don't be over ambitious with the number of planned fixtures – a league based on 8 –10 teams appears to be preferable.

*"Our advice is to encourage Flexibility on fixtures, no restriction on size of squads, try and make the running of the team as easy as possible regarding communication and administration, restrict the amount of travel as parents not so involved and not all lads have cars. Keep amount of teams in league at a reasonable number as too many fixtures will not get completed. Try and subsidise wherever possible. Offer help and advice and do not fine unless necessary."*

**Somerset U18 youth league**

## PLAYING WITH MATES IS STILL A DECIDING FACTOR

It's may be easier to transition existing teams into adult football rather than individual players

*"New U18 division has formed a bridge between U16 football and adult football which is a huge jump. Several of the local clubs have introduced adult teams in recent years to retain their youth sides – more likely to retain players if they are continuing an already formed group of players."*

**Cheltenham Youth Football league**

*"Stop thinking about moving players into open age. Start thinking about moving teams – They want to play with people they know, their friends. There needs to be a direct link that takes junior teams straight into open age."*

**Huddersfield Junior**

## GO GREEN

Be conscious of the travelling commitment required for fixtures. Players of this age group may be less likely to have their own cars than previous generations.

## START THE CONVERSATION EARLY

Talk to youth leagues and then teams coming to the end of U16 provision after Christmas of the previous season as what their plans might be. Try to make it personal – face to face seems to have a great impact particularly when youth teams or leagues may have reservations about adult football.

## BE A FLEXIBLE FRIEND

Getting U18 or U21 leagues up and running and sustaining the involvement of teams may require you to be much more flexible than you're accustomed to.

*"Embrace the concepts of the youth leagues these teams have come from. Compromise is a key issue. If you want to control and dictate archaic processes it will not succeed."*

**Mid Solent Youth League**

## KEEP IT CHEAP

Moving from youth to transitional or open age football will often mean that previous sources of subsidy for teams disappear and they are required to find more money as a team and as

individuals to play. Finance is a real challenge and league organisers should take this into account in their setting of fees and levying of fines. Make teams aware of any funding programmes operated by the CFA, FA or Football Foundation where the creation of transition teams or competitions is often identified as a priority area of funding.

## SQUAD NUMBERS 1 – 40

It's very likely that teams will require large squads to complete their fixtures. Don't impose squad caps and allow for easy player registration.

## YOU'LL WIN NOTHING WITH KIDS

Consider allowing the involvement of a small number of over age players for the U21 age group –a maximum of 2 –3 per fixture. This may allow teams both to fulfil fixtures and provide them with adult leadership that may be essential for the team.

*"The setting up of our T20(U20) league has proved very successful and this season we allowed teams to register two over age players, also all clubs are given a league mentor in their first season with the league."*

**Tucker/Gardner Alliance**

## OLD, WISE HEAD

Ensure that teams upon entering a league have managerial/administrative support. If existing players are carrying out these functions the teams are likely to less likely to be sustainable. If they haven't got an experienced person in a club management role is it possible for the League Committee to identify a club mentor to oversee progress and offer experienced advice. A mentor could come from the League Committee or an established club.

*"Have a strong core of adults around to form a sound base to move forward. Initaly there are set backs but you must persevere. We failed the first time around with the U18 but finally got it of the ground with six teams and now have 46."*

**Bristol & Gloucestershire U18/21 Football League**





*“New teams start in bottom division. Assistance from Management Committee with continuing support as required. Management Committee has vast experience of the Women’s / Girls football with half of the committee with no club affiliation. Teams are encouraged to use qualified coaches to improve standards. All clubs are Charter Standard. Regular matches. Good organisation. After match hospitality. qualified referees. Quality coaches.”*

**West Riding County Women’s League**

## **UP FOR THE CUP**

Consider allowing U18 and U21 teams to play in open age cups. There is lots of anecdotal evidence that youth teams do well in such competitions and it’s an excellent way to introduce them to open age football.

*“We give U21 their own division, but let them join in with the older teams for cup matches.”*

**Portsmouth Saturday League**

## **SLEEPY HEADS**

The most popular kick-off time for these age groups appears to be Sunday afternoons but a number of leagues have urged organisers to be flexible in the arrangement of fixtures, particularly as accessing good pitches or referees may be more or less difficult at certain times of the weekend. Some leagues ask teams to identify a 10am, 12 or 2pm kick-off time at the start of the season.

## **UNDER THE LIGHTS**

Given the demands and preferences of young people at the weekend consideration should be given to initiating midweek floodlit leagues – perhaps on artificial surfaces at central venues.

## **IT DOESN’T HAVE TO LOOK THE SAME**

Given the challenges of sustaining the participation of players at this age a number of existing competitions offer formats which include repeat substitutions, central venues, reduced playing time, inclusion of over age players, small leagues with rejigs through the season to create different challenges for

teams, flexibility on fixture days and times. Above all it appears important to devise competitions which match the aspirations of the participating teams.

*“Sunday U18s and Saturday Mornings U19s. We plan to move up to U21s and our advice is to support the teams with less red tape, lower league fees and if at all possible central venues as it has better interaction between teams/ clubs, make game times and days more flexible, allow teams to agree on day time but have a default if they cant agree, if home and away allow flexibility in the amount of game time in conjunction with the referee it may be more suited to 35 minutes each way due to travel or players needing to go to work, small leagues with rejigs through the season creates different challenges for teams ie not top or bottom for whole season, most of all listen to what the players want and try to make it happen.”*

**Pinpoint League, Northumberland**

*“Plan to have two different mini-seasons to cope with drop out during the first half of the season. Ensure you have an appropriate set of league rules to accommodate adult as well as youth SCOR. Consider permitting the limited use of over-age players.”*

**Ipswich and Suffolk Youth League**

## **U/21 OR GO STRAIGHT TO OPEN AGE?**

U21 football can divide opinion. There are some open age leagues that consider it to be unnecessary and feel that they can provide for this age group – particularly if a league has a range of divisions of varying abilities. However there does appear to be a place for u21 leagues for players wishing to progress into the National League System where a couple of additional years of age appropriate development may be required in order to prepare them for a higher level of football. Many u21 leagues operate as reserve leagues for NLS clubs providing opportunities to develop young talented players whilst also providing for the involvement of a number of ‘over age’ players.

*“Under 21s is a much needed transition from youth to adult football. It encourages young players to develop in a secure environment*



*whilst experiencing competition. Approach local Step 6 and above clubs to look to enhance their set up to mimic the football league structure (first team, 21s and academy or 18s) and for established youth clubs to look to continue on to U18s and U21s."*

**Lancashire Sunday League**

*"A good League structure is a fundamental requirement as this facilitates the transition from youth to adult football. Youth teams have been invited to play in the League's open-age Cup competitions and this has worked well.*

*In our experience, setting up an U21 division can only be achieved by working closely with your local County FA.*

*It is important to convey a positive message about what U21 football has to offer as there is still a certain amount of scepticism about this relatively new concept."*

**Liverpool County League**

*"U21 you have to build up a network. You need to have a gap for it in your area. If your League has a good reputation it will attract players. You will need to be flexible especially at the beginning."*

**The ProKit Essex Olympian Football League**

*"38 teams predominantly Step 7 above. Teams attracted by the standard of teams competing in the League. The quality of the grounds matches are played on. Having three officials appointed to most matches."*

**North West Youth Alliance**

*"The first thing to do is find out if there really is a call for it. Ask would you play U21 in favour of reserve football? If you play both would you stretch the players too thin. Keep things simple and the rule set minimal. Try and work with other leagues."*

**Kent County League**

## **FINAL WORDS OF ADVICE**

The drop off in participation between youth and adult sport has long been an issue for sporting organisations. This drop off can now be tracked from as early as 14 and can be attributed to complex reasons that are more diverse than simply moving from a youth to adult environment. Yet given the popularity of youth football and the huge numbers involved the future health of the adult game can be secured by ensuring that a larger proportion of young people make this transition. What the FA's research demonstrates is that if league administrators take into account the identified constraints and lifestyle factors in the organisation of their competitions and proactively seek to recruit youth teams and players, it is possible to successfully organise transition competitions. In doing so leagues can secure the next generation of adult players and their own future.

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