

FA Announce Restructuring of Non-League

Article By:

Sports & Entertainment - Squire Patton Boggs

With most footballing eyes firmly on the World Cup, and England's crunch match with Belgium, the Football Association's League Committee (FALC) has [announced a change in the way the National League System \(NLS\) is going to be structured](#) going forward in order to create a more consistent system across the country that standardises the movement through the English Football Pyramid.

The changes include reducing the number of clubs in some divisions, creating additional divisions at Step 4 and temporarily suspending the play-off system lower down the pyramid.

How is the NLS Structured?

The NLS, sometimes referred to as 'Non-League', is the structure of men's football that sits below the English Football League (i.e. the Premier League down to League 2), see the diagram below from the FA:

National League System Structure 2017/18 Season



By the 2020/21 season the aim is to have an additional Step 4 Division and two additional Step 5 Divisions. The restructuring aims to create what is called a 'perfect pyramid' at Steps 1-5, by having a 1-2-4-8-16 divisional model. In theory this would allow for consistency of movement in terms of promotion and relegation across the leagues in Steps 1-5.

Previous Inconsistency

For this season just passed, clubs in Step 6 leagues have been subject to a wide range of promotion – relegation regimes that can greatly affect their chances of moving up the NLS. Depending on the league, between 1 and 3 teams were promoted, some by way of a play-off system and some without such a system. There were also three independent Step 3 Leagues which had to apply to the FA and make a payment in order to be promoted.

The new system does away with this inconsistency. The play-off systems have been suspended (with the intention of bringing them back once consistency is achieved) and all the teams will enter into a promotion pool and be allocated new leagues by the FA.

Conclusions

There have been [34 appeals to the FA by NLS clubs](#) in relation to these plans. This is understandable given that these wholesale changes to the NLS are going to have an immediate,

tangible impact on a number of clubs around the country. There are teams that will have had their eye on a top 3 promotion spot and leagues that will have valued immensely the excitement of their play-off promotion system.

Some clubs will be relieved to have just missed out the changes. [Dulwich Hamlet FC](#) for example, were promoted to into the National League South this season after a dramatic play-off penalty shootout. This is the first time in 111 years the South London side have been promoted from the Isthmian League.

Ultimately these changes are borne out of a desire to ensure equality of opportunity for all clubs playing in the NLS. With so much focus on the Premier League it is great to see the FA investing time and energy in the lower end of the English Football Pyramid.

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