

Creating a five-year vision for the NVL

When we launched the Volleyball England *Game Plan* in 2020, one of our stated aims was to “work collaboratively to deliver and continuously improve the products and services that most benefit our clubs and the wider volleyball community”.

In turn, this gave rise to the objective, articulated within our more recent operational plan, to deliver “an aligned and optimised competition structure that engages, grows and retains people in the sport.”

With this in mind, the Ace Service Sub-Group was asked to determine a five-year vision for the National Volleyball League that would help to capitalise on its recent successes and deliver even greater benefits across our volleyball community.

An advisory group, comprising Sub-Group members, Hub staff and invited experts, was convened to consider the themes and principles that could underpin any such vision. Over the course of three meetings in which they explored the current NVL landscape, the group agreed that any future vision should coalesce around three key themes:

- reducing calendar congestion;
- delivering a consistent league structure that could remain in place for the full five years; and
- driving up standards throughout the league and working with regions and counties to help those on the periphery of the league.

What follows is an articulation of why these themes matter and the group’s initial suggestions of how they could be translated into practical outcomes.

Observations on these suggestions are now invited from members and will be used to help further refine the five-year vision ahead of the next Volleyball England Board meeting in late April.

Priority #1 | Reducing calendar congestion

Being an all-year-round sport, managing the competing demands of the indoor, sitting and beach seasons has always been a challenge. Since the pandemic, this has been further exacerbated by a boom in junior volleyball participation (300% growth at a national level) and a surge of interest in beach competitions and the NVL.

Across 27 weekends of competition, our indoor season is now expected to accommodate 14-18 league match weekends, with a further nine given over to the National Cup and Shield. There are also the Super League Final 4 play-offs and various divisional promotion and relegation play-offs to be factored in.

On top of that, our ever-expanding junior competitions now run across 18 weekends (a 33% increase from before Covid) while our junior talent programme looks to evolve its offer including expanding opportunities for younger players (Futures) and creating space to our Regional Association to offer development.

This calendar congestion places significant strain on players (particularly juniors who are engaged in multiple activities), club administrators, officials, venue availability and our own

Hub staff. Left unchecked, it could begin to compromise our ability to deliver against our national priorities in areas like talent, junior and workforce development.

In order to give our sport the breathing space it needs to develop as we all want it to, we suggest:

- creating a clearer divide between the indoor and beach seasons;
- reducing the larger division sizes within the NVL to achieve this, freeing up four additional weekends in the calendar;
- asking the Competitions Working Group to review the National Cup format with a similar target reduction in mind; and
- using these reductions to create a longer-term calendar with more certainty of future dates.

If we could deliver against these ambitions, we could eliminate most, if not all, of the competition conflicts that players (particularly junior players) and coaches can be faced with during the season. Less congestion within the season would help to better manage demand for match officials. Fixture secretaries would benefit from a more settled schedule and more free weekends. Development activities for players, coaches, officials and other volunteers could also be scheduled with greater confidence.

More broadly however, we feel that all this could help improve our NVL product, drive up standards both on and off the court and deliver the ambitions in *The Game Plan*.

Priority #2 | Delivering a consistent league structure

Since the 2019/20 season, the NVL has grown by 14%. Year-on-year, the league structure has adapted to accommodate this increased demand. While the volume of new entrants is to be welcomed, this growth has resulted in uncertainty for the teams within the league. Each season, the promotion and relegation scenarios have differed. Likewise, the size and structure of divisions 2 and 3 has changed on a regular basis.

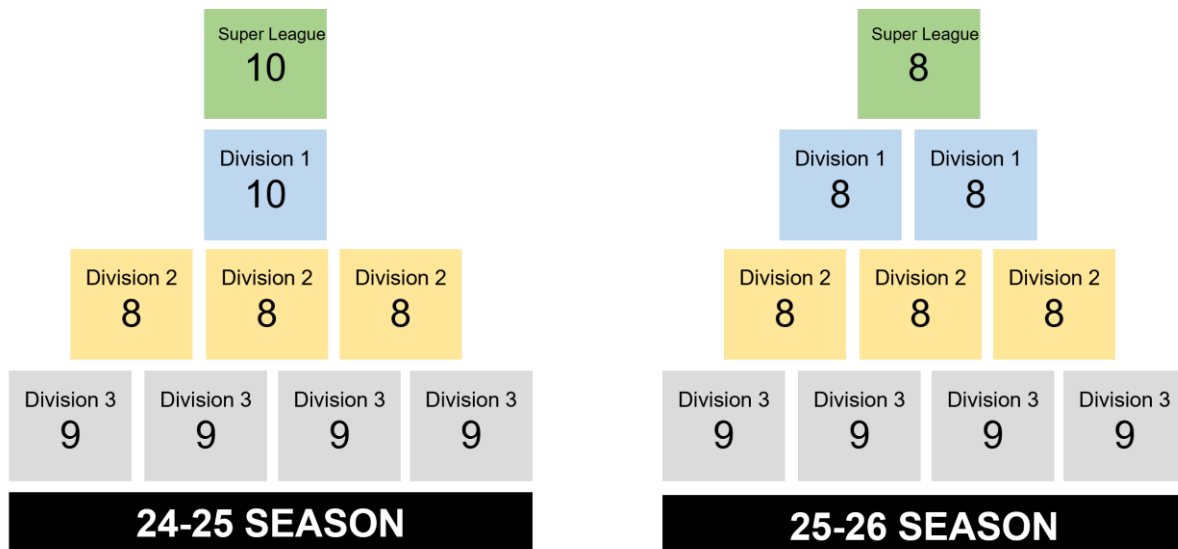
When looking at other UK sports' national leagues, change is far less frequent, giving all stakeholders far greater clarity around league structures for the foreseeable future. Delivering the same degree of certainty for the NVL should now be a priority.

In order to create an optimised competition calendar (priority #1) and to start driving up standards for those clubs within the NVL and just outside it (priority #3), we suggest:

- agreeing on a maximum number of teams that can compete in the NVL at any time and committing to this for five years from the 2025/26 season onwards;
- creating a structure of promotion, relegation and playoffs that will remain consistent throughout this period; and
- developing a set of criteria that clearly outlines how new teams may still enter the NVL at the expense of those who are struggling to maintain the standards required (on or off the court) to remain within the league.

The Competitions Working Group has already investigated the first of those points, suggesting that the optimal number of teams is 84 in both the men's and women's competitions. For reference, the 2023/24 season featured 79 men's teams and 78 women's teams.

Such an 84-team structure would feature four Division 3s of nine teams each; three Division 2s of eight teams; two Division 1s of eight teams (responding to Player Survey feedback from Division 1 where over 50% were unsatisfied with their travel distance) and a slimmed-down Super League of eight teams.



If adopted, such a structure would require a set of transitional relegation and promotion regulations to be put in place for the 2024/25 season.

Creating this new-look structure would provide clubs with greater clarity around their likely objectives and expenditure going into each season. Capping the number of fixtures, at the same time as working to increase our pool of available officials, would reduce the number of league fixtures taking place without appointed officials.

Priority #3 | Driving up standards

We know there are many challenges currently facing volleyball clubs in this country; everything from venue availability and spiralling living costs through to sourcing match officials and getting to grips with VolleyZone. Yet, despite all this, teams continue to pour into the NVL, our junior competitions and the beach tour. In the last two seasons alone, we received 47 applications from new teams looking to enter the NVL.

In many ways, this is one of the most remarkable - and somewhat unexpected - aspects of our post-Covid return to action. Nevertheless, we recognise that the continued expansion and popularity of the NVL may come at the expense of the strength of our regional and county leagues. We need a strong structure throughout the volleyball pyramid, not just at the top.

We also recognise that this could be the ideal time to capitalise on the strength and appeal of the NVL to help drive up standards, both on and off the court. We believe there is an opportunity to do this at both the top and bottom of our pyramid. We therefore suggest:

- working with the Super League clubs to articulate a collective five-year vision of a more professional and appealing product with improved commercial appeal;

- applying a consistent set of performance standards and creating a higher entry bar for potential new entrants to the NVL;
- playing a more substantial role in vetting potential new entrants and working with all interested parties to ensure a smoother transition between the NVL and the regional and county leagues (in both directions);
- working more proactively with clubs who may struggle with a higher performance expectation; and
- working with regions and counties to help them better accommodate the aspirations of clubs being held back from the NVL or removed from it.

Thinking about the prospect of being relegated or removed from the NVL, we acknowledge there will be push-back on this, especially from junior teams who may feel they are not yet showing their full potential. We also acknowledge there may be an almighty scramble for the final few places if the NVL is indeed restricted to 84 teams (priority #2) and that teams who may have otherwise withdrawn for a season or two will now look to retain their place in the competition.

However, as long as we can demonstrate that we are fair and equitable in all our decisions – and proactive in our support – we believe this can be managed in a way that strengthens both our national and regional structures.

Currently, teams typically only leave the NVL of own accord, normally because they are struggling to fulfil their fixtures. On-court performance is rarely considered - but in a truly competitive league structure, it should be.

Obliging some teams to stay within their local competition structures to prove their worth can only be a positive for our regions and counties. Likewise, teams having to raise their game to remain within the league can only be a good thing for the quality of volleyball being played within the NVL.

Meanwhile, if standards are also being collectively raised within the Super League, creating heightened expectations of existing Super League clubs and those keen to break into the Super League, this again can only be good for the sport as a whole.

For as long as the NVL is over-subscribed, the incentive of securing or retaining a place at an appropriate level represents a significant opportunity for us to raise standards across the entire league pyramid and beyond.