Preparing the Pitch – England’s Return to Grassroots Football

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On July 18, the English Football Association (the “FA”) announced plans for a ‘phased return’ to the pitch. For our American readers, the FA (formed in 1863) is the oldest football association in the world. It is responsible for overseeing all aspects of the amateur and professional game in its territory, which includes England and the three, self-governing island territories off the coast of Great Britain: Jersey, Guernsey, and the Isle of Man. The FA is a member of both the Union of European Football Associations (“UEFA”) and FIFA, and it holds a permanent seat on the International Football Association Board (“IFAB”), which is responsible for the Laws of the Game (i.e., the codified rules of association football).

In response to the FA’s plans for a ‘phased return,’ the Club Preparation Fund – “a unique partnership which enables the key football partners to come together around a shared vision; to improve football facilities across [England]” – agreed to help clubs prepare their buildings to safely reopen in line with the FA’s protocols.
and Government guidance. With the assistance of the Premier League, and the Government’s Football Foundation (the United Kingdom’s largest sports charity), the Club Preparation Fund has launched the “Pitch Preparation Fund,” which will award 3,838 grants worth £1,691,500 (“Grants”) to clubs of varying sizes. Entities eligible for the Grants include, grassroots football clubs (including Step 7), English FA National League System clubs (from Steps 1 to 6), English FA Women’s Pyramid clubs (Tier 1-5), County English FAs, professional Club Community Trusts, Leisure Trusts (with an annual turnover of less than 500K) and Welsh Premier League clubs (for a side by side comparison of the eligible parties versus non-eligible parties, visit the Football Foundation’s website). This announcement follows nearly £7m of investment that has already flowed into the Pitch Preparation Fund.

The move will assist clubs in positioning themselves to start playing football again when it is safe to do so. The loss of traditional revenue streams due to lockdown, coupled with challenging winter weather conditions, are two external disruptions the Pitch Preparation Fund hopes to mitigate. Sports Minister Nigel Huddleston responded to the initiative by stating the importance of grassroots football: “Football is at the heart of communities across the country and we’re determined to help local clubs bounce back stronger than ever ... I’m delighted to see grassroots football return and I know this investment will do so much to help teams stay safe.” Robert Sullivan, Football Foundation interim chief executive, added, “[t]his Fund reflects the determination of the Premier League, the FA and [the] government to work together to make funding available to help get pitches match-ready for when restrictions are lifted.”

Grants awarded will assist in essential maintenance work for grass pitches, including weed killing, fertilizing, over seeding, slitting, vertical decompaction and routine preparatory works such as line-marking of the pitches, grass cutting and setting out. Grants provided to clubs with artificial pitches will be put towards deep cleaning, over marking and FA pitch testing. Clubs and other organizations will also have access to the Football Foundation Groundskeeping Community, which is a free online resource developed between the Football Foundation, the FA, and the Grounds Management Association, containing advice and guidance on implementation of the grants and subsequent maintenance. All decision regarding the funding were communicated by June 8 and the Grants by-the-numbers can be found below.

In comparison, the Premier League and the FA Facilities Fund Small Grants Scheme typically awards grants of up to £10,000 for the provision of capital items, or to refurbish/improve existing facilities. The Small Grants Scheme mandates grants cannot exceed 50% of the total project cost, which includes replacement of unsafe goalposts, portable floodlights, storage containers, pavilion or clubhouse refurbishment, grounds maintenance equipment, pitch improvement works (natural and artificial surfaces), and fencing. Organizations are only allowed to apply for a maximum of £10,000, every two seasons (1 June – 31 May). The single grant application process is available to local authorities, educational establishments, grassroots football clubs (not including those in the English FA National League System), professional and semi-professional Football Clubs and their associated Community Organizations to support their community outreach programs. Since 2001, the FA and its founding partner, the Premier League and Sport England,
through the Football Foundation have invested a total of £780m to facility improvement across 1600 projects.

**Grants by the Numbers**

- 3,383 total grants awarded;
- £1,691,500 of investment
- 40,131 football teams benefiting;
- 32,921 grassroots teams benefiting;
- 9,000+ football pitches will be made match-fit;
- 6,742 teams in The FA National League System will benefit;
- 197 teams in The FA Women’s Football pyramid will benefit;
- 10 grants awarded to clubs in the Welsh Cymru Premier League.

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