

Officiating Review

[May 2023]

Last year, the Ace Service Sub-Group embarked on a review of the state of volleyball officiating in England. At the time, there was a widely held assumption that this was an area of the sport that required attention.

We knew that the number of qualified officials was falling, that clubs were struggling to source the officials they needed, that retention was poor at the bottom end of the officiating pathway and that those officials who were still engaged were increasingly frustrated or disillusioned (for a variety of reasons).

However, there was previously no central evidence base to demonstrate the scale of the problem or to suggest where Volleyball England should be targeting its efforts in this area.

Therefore, in the summer of 2022, we undertook a substantial review of available data to deliver a more comprehensive picture of officiating and our main problem areas.

A team was convened to work through the findings of that data and to suggest ways in which the situation could be improved. Over the course of three meetings in late 2022, a series of ten recommendations emerged¹. These ranged from low-cost and/or quick win suggestions through to more ambitious recommendations which may require substantial changes to the existing officiating structure, pathway or culture.

A small project team (comprising members of the Officials Working Group, the Ace Service Sub-Group, Hub staff and officials) was subsequently assigned to each of those recommendations and asked to further develop or refine the thinking behind them. The Volleyball England Board was briefed on the state of the Officiating Review in January of this year and advised that some of these recommendations, should they come to fruition, would have financial implications for the organisation.

With the review element of this project complete, our focus now shifts to supporting the ten project teams to get whatever they need to finalise their recommendations and present them for final approval, as appropriate, by either the Hub's senior management team or the Board.

Work is already underway to progress these recommendations. Indeed, the thinking behind some of them is already evolving and taking them in slightly different, but very interesting, directions.

In publishing these recommendations – and the reasoning behind them – now, we hope to also give Volleyball England members the chance to engage with these recommendations and provide their input.

It should be noted that the ten recommendations are not a single package of measures that have to be implemented all at once. However, there are strong inter-dependencies between several of these suggestions that the ten project teams have to remain aware of at all times.

¹ The people involved in this process included: Simon Griffiths, Brendan Fogarty, Adam Walker, Richard Harrison, Jess Plumridge and Jake Sheaf (Board and Ace Service Sub-Group members); Nick Heckford (Head of the Officials Working Group and Ace Service Sub-Group member); Charlie Ford, Guin Batten, Rob Payne, Jonathan Moore, Gillian Harrison, Anna Knibbs and Dan Ward (Hub staff); Luke Thomas and Seb Wildarz. Further members of the Officials Working Group have since joined the process, assisting on the various proposal teams.

In addition, the work being done concurrently by the Volleyball for Life Sub-Group, exploring the respect agenda and how to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for our officials, is an important adjunct to our own review. Their findings and recommendations, as they emerge, need to be incorporated into our own project teams' thinking.

For now though, we recommend that the Board supports further exploration of these ten recommendations; prioritises this work (in terms of allocating Hub staff resource to support it); and is prepared to provide the necessary financial support to turn recommendations into reality.

With these measures in place, we feel we can begin to address some of biggest challenges facing our officials and clubs and set Volleyball England on the path to developing a more sustainable officiating structure.

Officiating data

The officiating data that was collated in the summer of 2022 originally ran to 32 pages. Some of its most noteworthy headline findings were as follows:

- a steady decline in the number of active NVL refs, from 131 in 17/18 to 109 in 21/22;
- in 21/22, each active referee was appointed, on average, 14 times by Who's The Ref (WTR);
- over 500 referee appointments in the NVL (25%) were left unfilled by WTR in 21/22;
- plugging that deficit would require a further 35 referees;
- with the NVL growing, this deficit will only continue to increase;
- only 61% of matches had two referees appointed to them by WTR, placing the burden on clubs to find the other ref(s);
- of the 119 members with dual coaching and refereeing memberships, only 35 were active referees in the NVL;
- 25% of our active referees are over 60 years old;
- 199 new Grade 4s were registered in 21/22. However, overall referee registration renewals have remained consistently in the low 100s for several seasons, suggesting that the number of Grade 4s staying in the system beyond their free membership is only ever just enough to replace those retiring or leaving;
- the reliance on a cadre of top referees is increasing year-on-year. The ten most active referees accounted for 24% of NVL appointments in 21/22, up from 19% four years earlier;
- of the 1128 Grade 4 course participants since 16/17, only 5% have progressed beyond Grade 4;
- despite a 1:1 gender split at the participation level, male referees outnumber female referees by 2:1;
- for the last three years pre-pandemic, 26% of Grade 4 courses were cancelled every year;
- the referee registration fee was held at £38 from 11/12 to 17/18 and has since increased steadily to £43.50 now;
- referee payment rates have remained unchanged since 16/17 (£17-£20 per match, depending on the division).

There were positive signs within the data – such as the experience that learners had on the Grade 4 course and the course tutors' satisfaction ratings. However, it was clear that there were also plenty of areas where remedial action clearly needed to be taken.

Recommendations

From the discussions we subsequently held on what this data meant for Volleyball England and what needed to happen next, several broad objectives emerged:

- 1) To make officiating a more attractive and rewarding proposition;
- 2) To revisit the officiating pathway, thinking both about how people enter the pathway and are moved along it; and
- 3) To better recognise the contribution that officials make to the sport.

Even more simply, this was about how to “recruit, reward, recognise and retain”.

Our ten recommendations were then as follows:

Proposal #1: Increase all NVL referee match fees by £10 per person, per match. Objective: to make officiating a more attractive and rewarding proposition AND to better recognise the contribution that officials make to the sport.

Proposal #2: Investigate the possibility of increasing the referee’s fee still further for a Super League game. Objective: to make officiating a more attractive and rewarding proposition AND to better recognise the contribution that officials make to the sport.

Proposal #3: Investigate the possibility of creating a central expenses top-up fund, allowing referees to travel further afield to attend matches, without burdening clubs with additional costs. Objective: To revisit the officiating pathway, thinking both about how people enter the pathway and move along it.

Proposal #4: Investigate the possibility of a two-tier Grade 4 structure, possibly featuring a slimmed-down, cheaper product for most and a more comprehensive, formal development programme for the remainder, complete with aftercare, proactive mentoring and a fully articulated progression timeline. Objective: To revisit the officiating pathway, thinking both about how people enter the pathway and move along it.

Proposal #5: Investigate the purchase of a technology solution that could be used for remote referee observations. Objective: To revisit the officiating pathway, thinking both about how people enter the pathway and move along it.

Proposal #6: Immediately implement a recognition scheme for referees, celebrating time served and/or number of matches officiated. Objective: to better recognise the contribution that officials make to the sport.

Proposal #7: Revisit how we provide training to registered referees each year, covering topics relevant to their role, as part of a broader calendar of diarised referee development events. Objective: To revisit the officiating pathway, thinking both about how people enter the pathway and move along it.

Proposal #8: Investigate the possibility of an agreed annual schedule of referee observation events. Objective: To revisit the officiating pathway, thinking both about how people enter the pathway and move along it.

Proposal #9: Work with BUCS to explore their minimum officiating standards and how more students might be retained within the officials pool. Objective: To revisit the officiating pathway, thinking both about how people enter the pathway and move along it.

Proposal #10: Help to raise the status and profile of referees within the game, using existing Volleyball England channels. Objective: to better recognise the contribution that officials make to the sport.

It should be noted that much of what is suggested here is directed at Volleyball England activities (such as officials' development) and competitions. This is not to ignore the officiating issues that may also exist elsewhere, in regions and counties, for example. However, this is a starting point; a way of beginning to address fundamental issues within our officiating structure which, if done correctly, will see improvements filtering throughout the entire sport and across all our disciplines.

When taken in their totality, what should begin to emerge here is a people development plan; a more structured approach to recruiting officials, developing and rewarding them appropriately and recognising the contribution they make to our sport.

For that reason, the recommendations should not be reviewed in isolation. There is little point, for example, in raising officials' payment rates if there are still too few officials to go round. Nor is there any sense in putting on more Grade 4 courses if the retention rate remains so low or encouraging more officials to progress when there is insufficient observation capacity for upgrading them.

If we want to increase the size and quality of the officiating cadre as well as satisfaction levels among clubs and officials, then we need to address our main issues in a holistic fashion, rather than through isolated measures.

The recommendations in more detail

Proposal #1: Immediately increase all NVL referee match fees by £10 per person, per match.

The rationale: Match fees have not increased for six years and are not a fair reflection of the time and effort referees put into each match (and the expertise they bring). Encouraging younger officials into the sport is also challenging when match fees compare poorly to other sports.

Regulation D 3. Expenses for Match Officials:

Per match	Super League	£20
	Div 1	£17
	Div 2	£17
	Div 3	£15
Matches 1 & 3 of a triangular	Div 2	£40
Matches 1 & 3 of a triangular	Div 3	£36
Cup	Rounds	£17
	Semis	£20
	Finals	£25
All Competitions Finals (except where Tournament fees apply)		

Points for the project team to consider: Whether £10 is the most appropriate amount; the rate at which referee fees for VE-hosted events would also need to increase; the affordability of this from a VE perspective; and what possible measures (if any) could be put in place for clubs or players to offset the increased cost.

Proposal #2: Investigate the possibility of increasing the referee's fee still further for a Super League game.

Rationale: Offering even further financial reward at the top of VE's competition structure may help to incentivise officials further down the development pathway. It would also help recognise the officials' importance in delivering VE's premium product. This may require officials to take on further (pre-game) responsibilities that contribute to an even more attractive product.

Points for the project team to consider: What a Super League club would get for this extra cost; how they're likely to feel about this; how it needs to be positioned; the implications this might have further down the pathway (i.e. among lower grade referees); and how this links into the thinking going on elsewhere in proposals 1, 3 and 6.

Proposal #3: Investigate the possibility of creating a central expenses top-up fund, allowing referees to travel further afield to attend matches, without burdening clubs with additional costs.

Rationale: This could help in certain areas of the country which are currently officiating 'dead spots' with very few available, local officials. Agreeing to contribute to travel expenses could allow clubs to effectively extend their officials' catchment area without incurring further cost themselves. It may also prove attractive to officials looking to progress but who have few opportunities for higher-end fixtures in their locality.

Points for the project team to consider: How this would work in practice; how much money would be required to fund this effectively; how to deliver the best return on investment;

whether to prioritise regional coverage vs targeted, individual development; and what this means for how we use (or change how we use) Who's The Ref.

Proposal #4: Investigate the possibility of a two-tier Grade 4 structure, possibly featuring a slimmed-down, cheaper product for most and a more comprehensive, formal development programme for the remainder, complete with aftercare, proactive mentoring and a fully articulated progression timeline.

Rationale: Retention rates at Grade 4 are low. Progression rates are even lower. Learner feedback suggests that most Grade 4 course attendees are motivated by needing to gain the qualification (but not needing to retain it) or wanting to improve their understanding of the game and how they play it. Very few register with the specific intent of progressing further. These two very different audience segments should be targeted differently, in ways that deliver greater retention among the more casual learners and allow for more dedicated support to be given to those members keen to progress further and quicker.

To consider: How appropriate this is or whether other approaches would be preferable; what both schemes would look like, how would they run and how would they be administered; pricing points, value proposition and timelines; product variations for beach, sitting and junior officials; implications for minimum reffing standards at regional and county league levels and BUCS competitions; requirements in terms of resource (Hub, OWG and tutors) and investment; and how best to market these products to their newly-segmented audiences.

Proposal #5: Investigate the purchase of a technology solution that could be used for remote referee observations.

Rationale: With referee observers typically in high demand as officials in their own right, the available capacity for undertaking observations can be limited. A technology solution (e.g. [Veo](#) or [Pixellot](#)) could be the answer, allowing for observations to be done remotely or retrospectively. Such technology may also prove valuable to VE in other ways (such as for live streaming and coaching analysis).

To consider: Pros and cons of all available suppliers; likely cost (capex and licensing) and VE affordability; the officiating community's functionality requirements from such a solution; and how to extract maximum added value from this expenditure elsewhere in the organisation.

Proposal #6: Immediately implement a recognition scheme for referees, celebrating time served and/or number of matches officiated.

Rationale: No such scheme currently exists, yet many of our current officials have been on the circuit for some time. Anecdotal feedback suggests that some form of official recognition would be appreciated.

To consider: Scheme design; what achievements to recognise and when; cost and affordability; and how the scheme would be maintained.

Proposal #7: Revisit how we provide training to registered referees each year, covering topics relevant to their role, as part of a broader calendar of diarised referee development events.

Rationale: While events have been laid on – and training provided – in the past, this needs revisiting. This is an opportunity to provide training, insights and advice to officials, whether on topics directly related to volleyball or to officiating more generally, drawing on experts from across the sporting world. Done correctly, this would form part of a reinvigorated package of proactive referee development.

To consider: Cost and affordability; how it would be offered; who would be eligible; how it would be administered; how it could be planned and promoted well in advance.

Proposal #8: Investigate the possibility of an agreed annual schedule of referee observation events.

Rationale: The previous approach to arranging for a referee to be observed and upgraded was not as clear or as straightforward as it could have been. Using several pre-agreed VE competition days as mass observation opportunities could help in this regard. It would help clear the backlog of referee waiting to be observed and allow individuals to proactively target specific dates for being observed. This links closely to proposal #5; the two could work in tandem – or the success of one may preclude the other.

To consider: What's required to make this work; how to promote the availability of observation 'slots' to eligible referees; avoiding over-subscribing events with too many referees; whether observed referees receive no fee for that match; how to maintain a prioritised list of referees who need observing; how best to use technology (see proposal #5) to assist with this; and how, in time, this process might be tied into any new entry-level pathway emerging from proposal #4.

Proposal #9: Work with BUCS to explore their minimum officiating standards and how more students might be retained within the officials pool.

Rationale: Every year, a substantial number of university students enrol on Grade 4 courses as this is the minimum qualification required to officiate in the vast majority of BUCS matches. There is however no requirement to remain as a registered official, meaning that dozens of officials are lost from 'the system' every year. There is an opportunity here to rethink the officiating pathway from the perspective of the student official (and the university that typically pays for their qualification), considering how they enter the pathway and – ideally – remain on it.

To consider: How best to engage BUCS as an active participant in working to improve the state of officiating; and how this all links to proposal #4, with the possible emergence of a new, lower-cost student reffing product, while still trying to encourage more student referees further along the pathway.

Proposal #10: Help to raise the status and profile of referees within the game, using existing Volleyball England channels.

Rationale: Within the VE's current broad content mix, officials could feature more – and not solely in those channels or forums where the audience is predominantly other officials. There are plenty of interesting and inspiring stories to tell about our officials. We need to get better at capturing and telling these stories.

To consider: What more could be done within existing VE communication channels to highlight referee achievements, personalities and good news stories.

On behalf of

An Ace Service Sub Group.