

Swim England Water Polo Leadership Group Strategy Update

In April 2020, the Swim England Water Polo Leadership Group published its five-year strategy for the future of the sport. Here, the chair, Toby King, gives an update on the progress made so far:

While launching a [new five-year strategy](#) during a global pandemic and lockdown might not have been ideal, a lot of good work has already been carried out. We obviously didn't get the start to the project we had hoped for but given the constraints we have faced, much has been achieved.

I am extremely grateful for the effort and commitment shown by everyone working on this project.

We look forward to hitting all our goals over time but I wanted to share with you the work in progress on increasing participation, reviewing competitions, improving development opportunities for coaches and officials, ensuring that the talent pathway is optimised for our athletes and for success on the international stage in due course.

Thanks again to everyone for their support in these challenging times.

Targets achieved

1.

For competitions, we said we would ensure that players of all standards can play games at an appropriate level. We would agree Swim England fees for those playing in low-level competitions only.

Players involved solely in low-level competition need only Category 1 Swim England membership and they can start at the age of seven. Schools can play against clubs without all players being Swim England members if the school is affiliated to ESSA.

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We said we would put in place a rolling 12-month calendar outlining all competitions that would be regularly updated.

This has been repeatedly impacted by Covid-19, but we will publish a summary of the key target competitions and the latest British Water Polo League schedule etc, by the end of February. Once the Covid situation improves, we will add training camps etc for the various squads.

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For coaching, we said we would deliver 10 subsidised courses to enroll 100 new coaches.

We have enrolled 101 assistant coaches and 18 coaches, although Covid constraints have limited practice sessions. There will also be heavily subsidised tutor courses for coaching in 2021.

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We said modular level 1 coaching courses would be implemented by 2021.

Level 1 and 2 courses are now modular and the 2021 schedule will be widely publicised. This modular approach will help us achieve our aim of making courses as cost-effective as possible.

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We aim to have an annual calendar of coaches' courses that meets the needs of the sport regionally and nationally.

The 2021 calendar for coaches' courses will be published by the end of March 2021.

Work in progress

- **We said we would improve our communications to educate people about Swim England registration and the benefits of water polo.**

We have used social media regularly to communicate what is going on in the water polo community. When Covid constraints ease, we will step up communications to the broader aquatic world to increase awareness of the sport's benefits.

- We said we would work with swimming clubs to break down barriers and explain how the journey from swimming to water polo helps keep members involved in aquatics.
We have identified clubs and coaches to help understand the current barriers to people playing water polo. We aim to send them questionnaires and set up sessions with them.
- We said we would use best practice examples of junior/mini polo and others to develop membership and increase diversity.
We have engaged with Habawaba and others to understand the barriers to participation; developed a prototype low-cost mini-goal; clarified Category 1 and 2 rules; achieved agreement that younger players can compete; and that schools can play against clubs more easily.
- We said we would improve engagement with school and university aquatic populations, particularly now water polo is back on the GCSE curriculum.
We have secured funding for state schools to start playing water polo; applications are now being invited from schools.
- In coaching, we said we would ensure that there are enough suitably qualified tutors and high-quality coaching materials nationwide.
We have secured funding for tutor training courses, and an application process has been launched for a course in March 2021. The coaching courses for Levels 1 and 2 have been rewritten.
- We aim to increase the number of suitably qualified registered coaches and academy coaching contact hours by 10 per cent. There are currently 324 registered coaches.
Only eight coaches have completed training and Covid constraints have limited academy hours. But we are also aiming to enable the recognition of some prior learning (eg, teachers and overseas coaches with pre-existing qualifications) and discussions are ongoing.
- We said we would increase the number of suitably qualified referees and table officials by 10 per cent in 2020 and 2021, and 15 per cent in 2022-24.
We have adapted these courses so that they can be mostly delivered online, and we are hoping to catch up on this target in 2021-22. The first courses are scheduled for the second quarter of 2021.
- We said we would reinstate referee courses to make them relevant for the desired level of competition.
Restructured referee courses are due to start in the second quarter of 2021.
- We aim to increase the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of officials' courses.
This is ongoing due to Covid constraints, but officials' courses are now largely online, followed by a short practical session.
- We said we would work with Swim England and others to ensure that there is a calendar of officials' courses that meets the needs of the sport regionally and nationally.
Courses will be organised by the regions and the BWPL, with a central calendar run by SE.
- We said we would ensure a suitable number of presenters for officials' courses nationwide.
We have trained nine presenters for referee courses, and seven for table officials' courses. Another presenter training course is due to be held in 2021 if we have sufficient demand.
- To fulfil our ambitions for the talent pathway, we said 80 per cent of enrolled players should complete the Diploma in Sporting Excellence (DiSE) each year.
This target is on track with 25 and 26 places taken in both the 2019 and 2020 cohorts.
- Our aim was for England to provide at least 80 per cent of players for all GB squads.
In the Senior, U19 and U17 groups, England has 96 per cent representation for both men and women.
- We have said we will produce an agreed set of standards and a selection policy for regional and national academies to recruit players and coaches.
A home nations leadership group has been formed with terms of reference and a four-year plan. This includes a clear framework for British and English squads – but significant work is needed.
- We aim to deliver a high-quality DiSE programme with tailored learning and training, supported by experienced, knowledgeable staff.
The programme is now under the umbrella of Loughborough College, with work ongoing to

- make it the flagship opportunity for talented 16 to 19-year-olds.
- We aim to increase training opportunities for talent pathway coaches.
A coach development manager has been appointed and some engagement has taken place, but Covid constraints have affected progress.
- We said we would ensure that stakeholder groups (players, coaches, officials) can exchange views regularly, influence and support strategy tactics, and learn from the experiences of other sports.
This is ongoing – largely through regional managers. We have also held four national Covid forums, attended by more than 60 people, to discuss back to pool training guidance; the regional managers attended two WPLG meetings; we are scheduling two further RM forums in 2021; the chair of the WPLG did a podcast with Paul Metcalfe and interviews with Water Polo England and BWPL.
- We aim to look at Swim England staffing needs across each strategic theme to ensure responsibility and accountability are properly aligned, and to ensure that the strategy is sustainable.
Furloughing during the pandemic has impacted our achievements here. Swim England also introduced a new structure in August 2020 and we have had to ensure that we can engage with it. The following appointments have been made:
 - ? Head of Development (Claire Coleman, promotion) – responsible for grassroots delivery in four key areas of governance, volunteers, growth and operator relationships.
 - ? Head of Performance Operations (Rachel Bayley) – responsible for developing and delivering the talent pathway and ensuring it is connected to the competitions pathway at club level.
 - ? Talent Officer (Norman Leighton) – responsible for operational delivery of the talent pathway; given operational direction by Rachel Bayley.
 - ? The Development Team – we now have four managers within the Development Team who have specialised areas. One will be a member of the WPLG.
 - ? Coaching Manager (Lindsay Trimmings) – new role, responsible for coach development.
- We said we would seek additional sponsorship for water polo and raise money to fund initiatives such as Drenched/mini-polo within the constraints of Swim England relationships.
Mini-polo sponsorship is being discussed, and a prototype low-cost mini-polo goal has been designed and made.
- We said we would look for extra funding, both cash and in-kind, to reduce the burden on competitive players, their families, and our volunteers, to make the strategy sustainable.
We have secured £6,000 from the Swimming Trust and submitted an application for £4,000. Two sponsorship deals have been negotiated, but implementation has been delayed by Covid.
- We said we would clarify the WPLG's governance role and its interaction with Swim England and others, with particular focus on oversight and strategy-setting.
The WPLG strategy for water polo in England 2020-25 was adopted and published. The WPLG Terms of Reference have been reviewed and updated in line with other disciplines and good governance. The Home Nations WPLG has been formed and now has its own Terms of Reference and five-year strategy. The role of the Sport Operations Committee representative (currently Ian Mackenzie) has been reviewed and updated. Discussions are ongoing about how the annual Implementation Plan is written, delivered and monitored – Covid has had an impact here.

Not yet started

1. To widen participation, we said we would develop a water polo CPD for swim teachers and swim schools.
Still to do.
2. We said we would conduct a thorough review of competitions under Swim England control (NAGs/IRs) and implement a structure to meet players' needs.
Not possible due to Covid-19; review is due for completion in 2021. This should allow us to

fulfil three other strategic aims: to build club culture and maintain the integrity of clubs/teams where it makes sense; to have clear criteria and aims for each competition and to avoid clashes with other disciplines; and to outline a competition pathway that shows how players and teams can progress to higher levels. A sub-group is being formed to drive this review, with a broad range of stakeholders.

3. We said the new coaching system would include CPD and opportunities for mentoring; there would be a network or membership scheme for coaches to facilitate communications and learning.

Discussions are ongoing about how best to achieve this.

4. We aim to ensure junior and senior English national squads compete in appropriate competitions to give them experience for any future GB programmes.

Covid constraints have made this all but impossible, but we are trying to support EU Nations, North Sea Cup, possible World University Games entries, and a Commonwealth tournament to be played alongside the Commonwealth Games. We are also planning to move to a four-year planning cycle for the competitions calendar, aligned with the Olympic timetable.

5. We said we would deliver “how to” masterclass papers to help clubs develop; topics to include negotiating with pool providers, recruiting swimmers as they leave competitive swimming, and setting up mini/junior polo sections.

With the introduction of the Development Team, there is recourse, but many of these topics will be easier when we are back in the water. With a wider focus, water polo clubs can benefit from the more general deliveries being introduced from February 2021 onwards, which will focus on club legal structures, club leadership and financial sustainability.

6. We said we would consider how better to market water polo to the English population as a whole, to achieve wider participation in the sport.

We aim to produce some short videos on social media to better market the sport to young people, once we understand the barriers to adoption (see above). We are also engaging with other initiatives, such as Drenched and the new FINA “Swim and Play the Ball” scheme.

Toolbox



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