

## The TJF Conference League Survey

### Summary of results – Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2023

Between Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> and Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> of May, The Jags Foundation asked its 1059 members to complete a survey on the proposal for the introduction of a Conference League into the Scottish football pyramid. The members were asked three questions, and given the opportunity to elaborate on their responses with written feedback. 384 members (36%) responded in the short period of time available.

#### Existing participation in the Lowland League

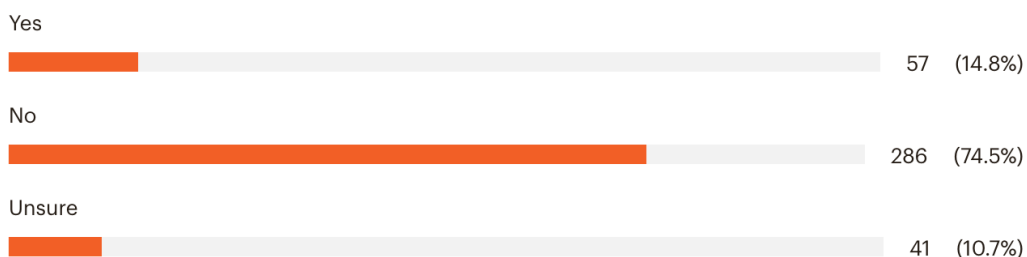
At the moment, the Lowland League (one of two divisions in the fifth tier of Scottish football) operates a “guest club” scheme. This has allowed “B-teams” of SPFL Clubs to participate in the Lowland League, on a season-by-season basis.

Guest clubs pay an agreed fee to the Lowland League, cannot participate in the SPFL League Two promotion play-off, and must re-apply each season (and have their participation approved by the permanent member clubs of the Lowland League).

So far, only Celtic, Rangers and (in season 2022-23) Heart of Midlothian have entered B-teams into the Lowland League.

We asked our members if they support the continued presence of B-teams in the Lowland League. The results were as follows:

#### “Question 1: Do you support the continued inclusion of B-teams in the Lowland League?”



The majority of the detailed feedback raised the following points:

- that the arrangement gives disproportionate influence to larger clubs (especially Rangers and Celtic)
- that other, better, more equitable development opportunities already exist (through the loans system)
- that it encourages larger teams to “stockpile” young players, leading to them getting less game-time in the SPFL

- that it has a negative impact on competition in the Lowland League (that some competitive fixtures were effectively turned into “friendlies”)
- that a dedicated reserve league for willing participants would achieve the same ends
- that the set-up stifles the progression of community clubs through the pyramid
- that it is a trojan horse for full access to the SPFL
- that there is no, or very limited, evidence of any positive impact on youth development and the performance of the national team

Those who were unsure, or in favour of the existing set-up, made the following points:

- that it is solely a matter for the Lowland League clubs
- there is a financial benefit to the Lowland League
- that B-team set-ups can work and have been used for a long time in other countries
- that it gives more young players regular competitive game-time
- that the “guest club” model keeps Lowland League Clubs in control of B-team participation
- that the current system would be preferable to a Conference League
- that the current system is justified in the absence of a reserve league

### The Conference League proposal

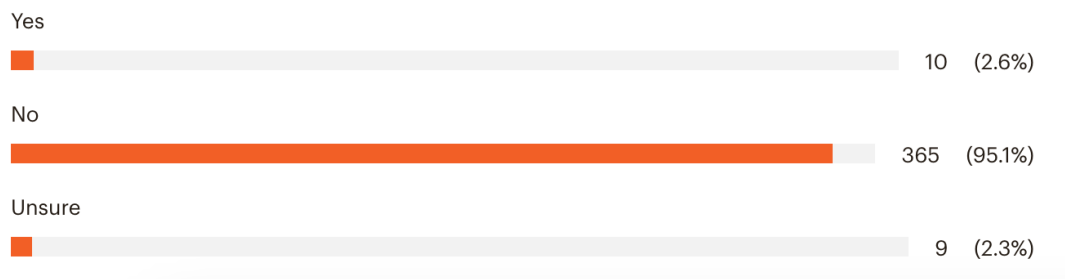
Under the Conference League proposal, a new league would be established in-between SPFL League 2 and the Highland/Lowland leagues. This would consist of (it was initially proposed) four B-teams and a handful of Highland and Lowland League teams. The entrants of B-teams would pay an annual “fee” and would not be allowed promotion to the SPFL’s leagues.

The creation of this league needs SPFL approval, as it would impact the existing play-offs arrangements (removing the existing ones with the Highland/Lowland Leagues).

As we understood it, initially the proposed four B-teams would be Rangers, Celtic, Hearts and Aberdeen. However, Aberdeen publicly stated that they would not be participating, principally on grounds of cost.

We asked our members whether they support the Conference League proposal. The results were as follows:

## “Question 2: Do you support the creation of the Conference League, including B-teams of certain SPFL member clubs, in-between League 2 and the Highland/Lowland Leagues?”



Very similar concerns were raised as with the Lowland League arrangement, with concerns in many cases being that existing problems would be exacerbated. Concerns raised included:

- that B-teams were “buying” their position, instead of starting from the bottom of the pyramid (and that this undermined sporting integrity)
- that this would undermine the open pyramid only relatively recently introduced
- that the proposal effectively “relegates” 200+ clubs, pushing them one further rung down the ladder
- that it would be hypocritical of Partick Thistle to have complained about our treatment in the Covid-affected season only then to back an arbitrary demotion of other community football clubs
- that it (even more than the Lowland League arrangement) is a trojan horse for subsequent attempts to allow promotion into the SPFL
- that the proposal looks to be financially unsustainable even for larger Clubs outside the Old Firm
- that the Conference League proposal had not been consulted on publicly and in detail with fans

One fan, who was very supportive of B-teams in-principle (based on experience of other European countries) said of the Conference League that it would “bring together many of the worst aspects of Scottish football administration and player development, creating a Frankenstein’s monster that won’t benefit anyone”.

### Promotion for B-teams?

Under the Conference League proposal, B-teams would remain ineligible for promotion. This means that, as is currently the case, other Clubs, potentially lower down the league rankings, would participate in any play-off competition for entry to SPFL League Two.

One concern of many fans was the possibility that the Conference League was a “trojan horse” for allowing promotion into the SPFL “proper” and that this would negatively impact established professional community clubs like Thistle, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> tiers of Scottish football. We asked our members whether they would support allowing promotion of B-teams beyond the 5<sup>th</sup> tier of Scottish football. This is what they said:

### “Question 3: Should B-teams be eligible for promotion to the SPFL?”



A (very) small minority stated that, if B-teams are to be part of the set-up, promotion and relegation should be based purely on sporting performance.

#### Conclusion

The sentiments of the 384 fans who responded to the TJF members’ survey may well be more strongly held than those held by the wider Thistle fanbase as a whole. However, the position could scarcely be clearer. Partick Thistle fans:

- are uncomfortable with the existing presence of B-teams in the Lowland League;
- are emphatically opposed to the Conference League proposal; and
- do not believe B-teams should feature prominently in the Scottish football pyramid.

We hope this feedback assists the Club Board, and others, when deciding how to vote on the proposals. As a fan owned Club, we’d hope the views of Jags fans are listened to carefully.

As Brian Graham alluded to in recent interviews, the arbitrary circumstances of our own enforced demotion in 2020, and the lack of solidarity from other SPFL member clubs, still jars for many Thistle fans. What would it say about us as a club if we voted to relegate some 200 sides for, on the face of it, the sporting convenience of Scotland’s biggest football clubs?

We also urge the Scottish footballing authorities to be much more transparent and open about the details of proposals such as these. It is not good enough to leave fans to rely on press reports to try to work out the detail when fundamentals of the football pyramid are potentially being changed. Scottish football is about more than just boardrooms and directors: it is fundamentally about the fans.