


CASE STUDY:
**BIRMINGHAM COUNTY
FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION**

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Birmingham County Football Association (BCFA) was founded in 1875 and is the governing body for football throughout the West Midlands and Warwickshire and has over 1200 clubs, 4600 teams, 1500 Registered Referees and countless coaches and volunteers within its boundary.

Being a company limited by guarantee, BCFA has a Board of Directors and also a Council of representatives who are nominated from all formats of the game which fall under the auspices of the Association. In 2013, their Articles of Association were revised to enable a restructuring of the Board, specifically to appoint Non-Executive Directors. Subsequently, having experienced the benefits of the changes, BCFA further revised their Articles in 2018 to broaden the skills base on the Board by recruiting openly for six Board positions.

The CEO, Chair and Deputy Chair of Council serve in ex-officio capacities and the Articles allow for the co-option of up to two additional Board members (non-voting) which has ensured the Board has access to specialist skills and insight.

There is a documented list of the skills, knowledge and experience required on BCFA's Board, and these helped form the six appointments. One of the priority areas is inclusion and BCFA radically changed its appointments process as it strived to achieve a more diverse Board which was more reflective of the football landscape. The rationale for this was the performance benefits diversity would bring to the Board and the organisation, and a desire to better reflect the communities the BCFA serves and wants to reach, especially non-consumers.



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WHY DID YOU NEED TO CHANGE THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR BOARD?

Prior to 2013, the Board composed of individuals elected by Council who, in turn, had been elected or nominated by member clubs and leagues. Board members were not reflective of the players, volunteers or the demographics within the region, and were selected from a relatively small pool of people. Although BCFA was not in crisis, the Board was perceived as passive, offering limited contributions or challenge to the executive. Board positions were seen as a closed shop and the lack of diversity meant there was little insight to inform decisions about how football should be delivered as well as running a successful business.

The way in which people play football has changed radically in recent years with women and girls, 5-a-side and other small sided formats, disability provision, futsal, walking football, and various flexible formats now sitting alongside the traditional 11-a-side male and female game. If BCFA wanted to grow the game and engage new participants, it needed a long term plan with different approaches, new insights, diverse perspectives, business acumen and innovation at Board level married with the skills and knowledge of the executive team.

A change in BCFA leadership culminated in the Board asking the FA to carry out an external review of the business in its entirety. Once completed, the Board recognised that

radical change was required and implemented the recommendations which included modernising the Articles of Association, the BCFA membership rules and decision-making processes along with changes in leadership amongst the workforce.

In 2015, after a consensus to continue to change, members agreed to advertise for three Director positions. There were 20 applications including some from existing Council members. The three members appointed were selected from outside of Council including two females (for the first time in the Association's 140 year history). The new Directors made a visible difference to the Board with new insights, views, ideas and perspectives, and it was agreed to extend the number of open applications as this had proved so successful.

The Code for Sports Governance was published in 2016 and, although BCFA does not have to comply with the Code's requirements, it was agreed in principle at that time that working towards this best practice model would be valuable for the organisation. It not only improved Board and organisational performance, it could potentially open up new funding streams. Whilst Directors were previously leading a football organisation, they recognised they were now leading a football business.



DIVERSE BOARDS AND THE ORGANISATIONS THEY SERVE PERFORM TO HIGHER STANDARDS.

HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT MAKING THESE CHANGES?

BCFA further revised the Articles of Association in 2018 to enable access to skills and expertise from a much broader base. They also recognised that a more diverse Board was important, not just because the BCFA serves a demographically diverse community but because it is well-known that diverse Boards and the organisations they serve perform to higher standards, and especially as BCFA is a high performing County FA.

It was important to engage and consult with key stakeholders including members, clubs, leagues, current Council members and strategic partners. BCFA built a business case that ensured everyone was considered in the new structure, in particular those individuals who had dedicated their lives to football, for example Life Vice Presidents and Honorary Members.

The Articles were approved in 2018 and now allow for:

- The introduction of a Selection Panel that shortlists the best candidates based on their skills, knowledge and experience. BCFA used a 'blind' CV process, thereby eliminating any unconscious bias from all applications and focusing solely on how candidates could add value to the organisation based solely on skills and knowledge.
- The open appointment of six Non-Executive Directors with various term limits – anyone can apply for these positions including individual members, Council members and applicants from outside BCFA. This ensures there is a balance of knowledge (football, finance, human resources, commercial, inclusion,

safeguarding, facilities and marketing) and skills in order to make better informed decisions.

- The Chair and Deputy Chair of Council to serve as Chair and Deputy Chair of the Board. This is under review and BCFA is considering future Chair appointments through an open application process.
- Co-option of individuals with specific knowledge and skills. Currently these are the former Chair of the Youth Council and someone with experience of a professional football club's charitable foundation, however the board can ensure it maintains high levels of diversity and expertise in any area through co-option.
- Terms of office in line with best practice that means no individual can serve more than three terms of three years. These ensure the Board is regularly refreshed with new skills and insight, but individuals have sufficient time to make an impact. It has been noticed that things are freshened up in the Boardroom when a newcomer joins and this is perceived as a positive effect of the limits on terms of office.

The introduction of a 'blind' selection policy in the recruitment process would not necessarily guarantee that a more diverse group of candidates applied for Board roles so BCFA targeted groups and communities with adverts for board roles. This had a positive impact in terms of applicants and, as no personal information was available at the shortlisting stage, the candidates selected for interview were much more reflective of the game as well as new, existing and emerging communities as well as the needs of the business.



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WHAT DIFFERENCE HAVE THESE CHANGES MADE TO YOUR BOARD?

The process, in particular the transparency and drive for specific skill sets, meant that 38% of the Board is now female and 25% from BAME backgrounds. Also over 75% of candidates were under the age of 50. Not only is the Board now much more diverse, the quality of Director input and engagement has significantly increased and all have a good knowledge and understanding of sport and/or a football interest plus high level business acumen.

The new Board is much more challenging in a constructive manner and has already had a positive impact on Board meetings and decisions. It can be best described as having access to continuous, exceptional and free consultancy advice. With more women and people from BAME communities on the Board, BCFA has access to insight which would have been lacking with the previously elected Board.

The initial six months has been a steep learning curve for all but we are already seeing areas of responsibility being developed by each Director. In particular, the BCFA's Inclusion Advisory Group (IAG) has been revamped to being an executive led body which a Director leads and reports on to Board and Council. BCFA is now able to maximise the skills and interests of Board members alongside those of the workforce making it a complete 'one team' approach whilst focussing on FA key performance indicators (KPI's) and feeding in ideas from others and communicating plans and achievements throughout the organisation.



WHAT IMPACT HAS THE NEW BOARD STRUCTURE HAD ON THE ORGANISATION?

The impact of diversity and new skills has been felt immediately with BCFA saving money due to high quality financial advice. In addition, the new Directors have opened up their networks for the organisation, helping to make connections to commercial, public sector and community bodies. This would not have been possible under the previously 'closed' Council led Board.

Directors have actively sought to build relationships with staff and, where appropriate are supporting projects and work streams. This has created a stronger link between the staff and Board, and also allowed BCFA to deploy the carefully selected expertise in key business and football areas.

It is important to note that none of these changes would have been possible if the BCFA's leadership, in particular the Chair and Deputy Chair and senior BCFA staff had not committed to improvement and planned the necessary governance changes and the FA's initial recommendations. The engagement of Council members and respected volunteers helped smooth the way to creating a balanced, skilled and inclusive Board which is now having a direct impact on the organisation's vision, mission and objectives. In addition, there is much greater stakeholder confidence especially from investors and partners such the Football Association, local authorities and community groups which will all benefit the game itself and participation as a whole.



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