

- [home](#)
- [news](#)
- [features](#)
- [comment](#)
- [letters](#)
- [advertise](#)
- [subscribe](#)
- [about us](#)
- [contact us](#)

Pete Ackerley: developing the national game

Having only been in post for six weeks, Pete Ackerley spoke to *The Leisure Review* about his role as the Football Association's senior development manager for the national (as opposed to professional) game and why banking's loss might have been sports development's gain.

As senior national game development manager for the Football Association Pete Ackerley is in charge of the development of all the non-professional football in England but he used to have a proper job. However, whether you think that job was working in banking or working in sports development depends on your point of view. Ackerley's mum certainly thought it was banking but her son realised fairly early on in his career in financial services that it was not a job he fancied doing for the next 30 years. As a semi-pro cricketer in the Lancashire leagues, he had been involved in plenty of coaching and development programmes and in 1995, with the impetus of the Sports Council's Champion Coaching initiative, he became part of the local coaching network in Lancashire. This led to a job with Lancashire County Cricket Club and in 1999 the England and Wales Cricket Board (known for some reason as the ECB) came calling to ask Ackerley to lead their education department and its work getting cricket into schools.

"Cricket at that time was at a pretty low point," Ackerley recalled. "I think we were actually bottom of the world table, below Zimbabwe, and had lost to New Zealand. It was all fairly fraught with a blame culture but I was able to be part of a sort of rebirth of cricket."

The ECB appointed a new chief executive, David Collier, in 2005 and this new broom put Ackerley in charge of development, a role that enabled Ackerley to launch what he describes as "probably cricket's first proper development strategy". This meant that it had clear objectives, it was properly costed and it built upon the previous two years of work. However, while it might have represented a new beginning for the ECB, for Ackerley it was very much just sports development.

"It's quite clear that you've got to get the people bit right and you've got to get the places that you play in right," he said. "Then, underpinning that, you've got to get the structure and the sustainability of what you do right. I thought this was fairly straightforward but, with the greatest respect, you are working with a huge volunteer network – which no sport can do without – that had done things a certain way for a considerable amount of time so it is a major bit of work to take them with you."

High-profile events such as winning the Ashes, which happened that September, are, Ackerley admitted, a significant boost to any development plan but they should not be a necessity. Even when England subsequently lost the Ashes in a five-nil whitewash, the ECB was able to report a significant increase in participation over the course of that year.

"I felt at the time we had set out to do what I think development is all about," he said. "You don't need luck. You put trust in what you are doing right and we stuck to our guns. The purpose of development is really quite straightforward. You have to create opportunities, you have to influence inside and outside the sport, you have to improve continuously – that's a given in business all over the world – and you have to create some sort of legacy process. That's not buildings or this legacy we keep hearing about in London [2012]. The legacy is whether you pass your sport on in a better condition than you found it. I was merely a trustee of the game of cricket and I passed it on in a better condition than I found it. I've now moved to another sport and the principles and purpose of what I do hold good: creating opportunities, influencing inside and outside football, building partnerships, the improvement process and legacy."

And so to the Football Association, where management of the game is split between the professional game and what the FA terms, perhaps rather presumptuously, "the national game". This, Ackerley explained, equates to pretty much everything to do with football below the Blue Square Conference, including more than 1,200 leagues in which around 135,000 teams play every week, disability football, women and girls, referees, the Respect campaign, education and schools, youth and adult football. His task is to manage the team that delivers the national game strategy, a document that, Ackerley is pleased to say, offers clear direction: sustain the game, raise standards, improve players and improve governance.

Such responsibilities, *The Leisure Review* suggested, might prompt the conclusion that he is in charge of a great big sports development unit. "That's pretty much it," Ackerley said. "It is a question of what is it you actually need and what does the game want? I

www.theleisurereview.co.uk



Pete Ackerley: coming off the bench to secure success

"The purpose of development is really quite straightforward. You have to create opportunities, you have to influence inside and outside the sport, you have to improve continuously – that's a given in business all over the world – and you have to create some sort of legacy process."

think that's the important part."

But given that the FA is one of the biggest players in the world's biggest game, to what extent can the ethos of sports development as most sports development practitioners would understand it – equity, equality of opportunity, accessibility -- survive? Does the scale of the organisation and the profile of the sport necessitate ethical compromise?

"If I were to be working in sports development with a local authority or with the governing bodies of cricket or football, the principles are exactly the same," he said. "It's a fairly simple process. You have to have an overall vision and purpose for what you're trying to do."

That this clarity of vision and purpose includes developing partnerships with organisations within and across the general practice of sports development will come as a welcome surprise to some who had gained an impression that the FA were willing, even keen, to stand outside the sports development fold. Ackerley was clear that the former is the case.

"Whether I'm with football or working for a small local authority in a rural area, you can't develop sport on your own," he said. "Local authorities can't do it, the sports themselves can't do it, schools can't do it. The first thing is, given your purpose, given your strategy, given your vision, who are our key relationships? Who is essential to delivering our success? Unless you can define those key relations and the ones who make a real impact -- and not the whole list a development officer might trot out at interview in response to the question of 'who will you work with in this role' -- you will struggle. Once you've got those relationships, the challenge is then to define success in their terms; not in your terms -- you can always do that -- but in their terms. Can you speak their language? That essentially is the trick. You can't be successful in sports development if you can't speak other people's language."

Ackerley conceded that establishing these relationships might be rather easier for a development officer with the full weight of the FA national game structure behind them than for someone working on their own and he also acknowledged that for the FA this may well represent a new way of working. "I think I'm going to make [relationships] easier by the admission that I need to work with other people," he said. "It's a slightly different approach. There's been an ethos in the bigger sports that 'we can do it ourselves' but you can't; it's impossible. I suspect that is why many sports have not been punching their weight for a long time."

Could this also see the FA playing a bigger part in the national sports development scene than it has done to date? "I think so. I see my role as developing strong partnerships with the Youth Sport Trust, Sport England, Sports Coach UK, building good relationships with the local government association, finding out who my key relationships need to be and at a national level supporting what they do. Influencing is the key. I'm not trying to say, 'You've got to do it this way because football says so.' We know what football needs and wants, and where we want to take our game. These are football's issues but we may be able to influence where other sports are going because football has huge publicity, an incredible amount of influence and profile, and we want to use that in a good way in sports development. Not to dominate. For us it's about working with the Premier League and Football League clubs really closely and understanding the roles and responsibilities."

Ackerley admitted that this perception of the FA's role might not be universally welcomed immediately within the organisation but explained that he has set his team the challenge of asking what football will look like in 10 years. While the eleven-a-side game might be largely unchanged, he expects shorter forms of the game to be reflecting the physical activity agenda and the different lifestyles of people who want to engage the game in different ways. He has also set his team the task of being recognised as the world's leading sports development team, although he accepts that this is a challenge that does not lend itself to easy benchmarking. However, his familiarity with the ECB, Cricket Australia and the Boston Redsocks' community programmes makes him believe it is possible.

"It gives us something to strive for," he said. "What does the world's best look like and keep challenging. Are we doing world's best practice? And not just get to hung up on that but ask what does football want, what do our customers want. We need to know a lot more about our customers and what they want rather than what we think they want."

Ackerley also thinks that the sports development profession has improved in its ability to deliver the goods. "I do think it's getting better at it," he said. "I think it is now realising that you can't overlay 1980s and 1990s sports development programmes onto the current day. I think there is a clear understanding that you have to know what your customer or the consumer of your sport wants. You've got to find out what is wanted and needed at a local level. I think that is starting to happen. I see a lot more flexibility and a lot more vision in terms of what the sport actually wants. Perhaps football has still got a bit to go -- I've only been here six weeks and I've still got to have a good look at it -- but can a sport like football, gymnastics, hockey or swimming put down on one or two pages what the sport needs and wants at a national level? At a regional level can they say what they need and want? Could they go down to the county sport partnership and say, 'This is what we need for football' and list this many coaches, this many volunteers, this many clubs, these facilities? Have they got that ability to articulate what they need? We could do that in cricket and while we didn't always get what we wanted we knew what we wanted."

www.theleisurereview.co.uk



Wembley Stadium: the FA's spiritual and now literal home

The Leisure Review is supported by:



The Leisure Review is written, designed and published by:



Nor does Ackerley have any problem with referring to sports development as a profession. "It's important that it is; this is a profession now. I'm very lucky with the team I've got. I can look around the table and say, 'This is a highly professional team of individuals that are passionate and committed. Sports development is a profession and it should be a profession but I still don't think we recognise its professional status enough."

However, Ackerley is wary of getting too hung up on the minutiae of career structures. Unlike the highly formalised career path within banking, he believes sports development should have room for the demonstration of commitment and passion. "You don't get people getting really energised about letters of overseas credit but in sport that is an important part of things. That [passion] is what you build your sports development programme on, as well as knowing what you need to do as a business to build the structure and speak the right language."

While acknowledging the value of data and service level agreements as a requirement of working effectively within and among modern organisations, Ackerley also expressed the hope that these systems and structures are able to allow for flexibility and innovation.

"We've got to start to trust people and start to invest in people," he said. "We need to say, 'Right, you're going to achieve those outcomes. I'm going to give you that resource to do it and as long as you deliver those outcomes I don't care how you do it.' People working locally are much better placed to know what will work locally."

He conceded that this approach is counter-intuitive within the current working practices of government and national agencies. Sixteen-year strategies would solve the problem but in a system that changes government every four years or so this is effectively an impossibility. However, Ackerley does think that if sports governing bodies sort themselves out and know what they want their sport to look like in 16 years they would stand a much better chance of getting where they want to go.

In summary he offered a simple vision of how things might work. "Sports development works when the people are right," he said. "We just need to get more of the right people in the right places."

The Leisure Review, April 2010

© Copyright of all material on this site is retained by *The Leisure Review* or the individual contributors where stated. Contact *The Leisure Review* for details.