**Old Loughtonians Hockey Club Limited (the “Club”)**

Further response to the proposed structural changes described in “A Structure Fit for the Future” - December 2019

**Summary**

As discussed with you on the telephone:

1. we support the proposals to introduce new rules and regulations which are consistent across all leagues in England; but
2. we cannot support the proposal to replace the existing 5 regions (all of which are working well at present) with 8 areas which are too small and will restrict opportunities, limit competition and potentially have a materially adverse impact on membership and club finances.

We urge England Hockey to recognise that what seemed a good idea in theory cannot work in practice and to limit any resolution in March to the introduction of the new consistent rules and regulations and not a new structure which is not only not necessary but could have longstanding damaging effects on the sport we all want to promote and play.

**Some stark facts**

Under the new proposals:

Our L1s would only play 1 of the 11 clubs they are playing this season;

Our M2s would only play Southgate and no other club in the London Premier League;

Our M3s to M8s and L2s to L4s currently play 24 other clubs in Essex and East. They would only play 7 of those. In other words we would no longer play 17 neighbouring clubs.

Our men play in the SW quarter of East which has 8 divisions. The London NE sub-area would have just 3 divisions. 14 of the 43 teams in that sub-area would be from OLHC or Southgate.

There are not enough clubs or teams in each area and sub-area and clubs would no longer be playing clubs of the right equivalent standard.

Sub-areas are smaller than 1/6th of a Region. The clubs in the other 5/6th of the Region will no longer be played.

After 2 years of consultation the detailed indicative leagues were only published at the end of December. There is simply not enough time before the meeting on 17th March to produce revised proposals especially if voting forms are being sent out in February.

This will affect all clubs (not just us) in much the same way.

Many clubs have not yet started their review of the December proposals. For something which will affect their members for years to come they need much longer than 2 months to digest what is proposed and decide what would be best for their members and their club.

**Background**

We spoke to you last year as part of the consultation process and asked you to review the proposal to introduce 8 new areas and to restrict clubs to playing in just the one designated area. We were very pleased to see that, on reflection you agreed that this would not have supported the aim expressed by Liz Pelling to create “more opportunities to play” and “more opportunities to succeed within the structure”.

At the end of December (only ten weeks before the AGM) you reissued your proposals in their original form together with the results of the consultation and the revisions. You also presented a map indicating where clubs might play under the new structure and a schedule showing which clubs would be in each sub-area. For the first time in this process (after over 2 years of consultation) clubs have been given a real indication of how the proposals will affect them and their members.

Unfortunately the interactive map produced does not work at all on some devices and cannot be copied or printed in order to help brief members. We have asked you for maps we can use to help members understand the proposals but received no response.

On 17th March clubs will be asked to vote in favour of these proposals as they stand and will then (if the resolutions are passed) be asked to decide which area (in practice which sub-area) they would like to play in.

The areas and sub-areas were created by consultants who were asked to try to create areas with roughly equal numbers of players and with a view to reducing travel times. They have succeeded in doing so.

However the results take no account of the realities of hockey. They do not take into account standards of hockey, type of club, who clubs actually want to play against or how many teams are needed to make a viable league structure.

We started by asking ourselves which areas our teams would like to play in and it soon became apparent that we do not want to lose what we have and that the new structure cannot work as presented and there is not enough time to consult with clubs again before voting papers are issued in February in order to suggest any alternatives. There are barely 5 weeks available.

The following shows the existing situation for our teams and what we (and the teams we currently play against) would be faced with under the new structure.

Incidentally the consultants seem to have used information from two years ago when creating the indicative leagues which does not help. We are shown as having 5 ladies teams. Our 5th team disbanded in 2018. Our newest men’s 8th team is not shown at all. Our men’s 2nd team is shown in the same London sub-area in tier 3 as all our lower men’s sides despite now being in the same London League Premier Division as teams listed in tiers 1 and 2.

**Old Loughts**

To recap, the Club runs 9 men’s teams, 4 ladies teams, 9 colts teams at u14, u16 and u18 level and 8 Mini teams from u8 to u12. It also has a Seedling group.

The men play in the National League Conference East, East Leagues and London Leagues.

The ladies currently play in the East Leagues and Essex League. Next season the Essex League will be join the East.

The boys Colts play in the England Hockey competitions and in the Mercian League and the Essex Indoor leagues. The girls colts play in the Home Counties League.

The Mini teams play in the Essex Mini League, development leagues and local tournaments.

**Ladies adult league teams**

The **L1s** play in the East League and hope to be promoted into the Premier Division this season. Although we specifically asked you to show them as an East club they have been added to Division 1 North in the London Area which contains 4 other clubs currently in East but only 1 from division 1S. The L1s are happy playing in the current East leagues and hoping to rejoin the National League through the East. Splitting off clubs from the East League and putting them in the London Area just reduces the number of clubs close to us which the L1s can play. We agree that there should be a Ladies London League similar to the men but it needs to cover the whole of London and (as now with the men) allow anyone within an agreed radius to join and play. As now it should be up to each club to apply to join a league and up to the league to agree who can join.

The **L2s, L3s and L4s** play in the Essex Ladies League which currently feeds into the East League and will be absorbed into East next season.

There are currently 6 divisions of 12 teams. The ladies play throughout Essex and enjoy playing a wide range of clubs from East London and Wapping in the west to Colchester and Colne in the East. The trips to Colchester are long but in general the travel is not an issue. With 72 teams to play against there is a sufficient range of standards and the level of competition is good.

Under the new proposals the 3 ladies teams would be asked to choose between:

1. playing in Essex in an East area but now travelling as far as Ipswich; or
2. playing in a new London sub-area playing only six of the teams they currently play against and now travelling to Potters Bar and Hendon.

The London area stipulated contains only 31 teams which is only enough for two divisions of 12 teams. 72 possible opponents would be whittled down to 24.

Liz Pelling, in her presentation, says that the changes will make hockey “more accessible to everybody” and that people will have “more opportunities to play” and “more opportunities to succeed”.

That is clearly not so. There are simply not enough clubs or teams to play against. The standards will vary tremendously and not make for good games. The Essex (to be East) Leagues work well. Why replace them at all?

**Men’s adult league teams**

Our **M1s** play in the East Conference of the National League. In common with most clubs we did not agree with the proposals introduced last year to create a new North/South tier of the National League structure above the three Conferences which has had the effect of reducing the top of the National League structure from 4 divisions (Premier and 3 Conferences) to 3 divisions (Premier and North/South) as well as increasing travel times.

The most ambitious players now want to play in just 3 instead of 4 divisions. EH does not even report all the Conference results in its round up any more. Adding another Conference just to create a neat pyramid will not improve the quality or the stature of the Conferences or the National League as a whole.

As acknowledged in the proposal, teams joining the Conferences will still need to be placed in the most appropriate geographical area. They cannot just automatically be put for example into the East/Midlands Conference just because they won the East Prem. Peterborough (for example as now) might be best placed in the North and Colchester the South East whilst Harlesden Magpies or Cambridge might be Midlands. We see no benefit in diluting quality by moving from 40 clubs to 60 and to 70.

We do however suggest that the National Leagues be expanded to 12 teams each (5 leagues of 12 - Premier and 4 Conferences). It seems strange that the best players in the country who train the hardest only play 18 matches a season when everybody else plays 22.

Our **M2s** play in the London League which has worked well for many years. It works because the clubs in the league want to play each other. They are mostly of a similar size and stature with good facilities, similar structures and with a raft of good teams. Players are prepared to cross London in order to play against each other. Generally the players are based in or around central London and use public transport. Our M2s would like to continue to play the same teams. As proposed, they would only play Southgate and nobody else from the current Premier division.

Under the new proposals our M2s (currently near the top of the London Premier division) are placed with our M3s to M8s in a sub-area containing only 11 other clubs and only 43 teams in total. The only equivalent club is Southgate which also has 7 teams out of 43. A third of the teams are from OLHC and Southgate. The other teams in the sub-area are a mixture of very different clubs which may be within a similar area but have very little in common with the teams our M2s would want to continue to play.

At present there are 10 tiers between our M2s in the Prem and M8s in East SW 10. In the new sub-area there would be at most 3 divisions (36 teams). The total London Area would only have 5 tiers. The areas are simply too small and proximity does not mean suitability of opposition. The London League works. Why not leave it in place and allow 1st teams to enter if they wish. In the future the league itself can look at how it operates in the lower leagues but please do not discard what clubs across London seem to want to play in.

If there is a desire to allow promotion from the London League to the National League then that is easily resolved without replacing a league which works well.

Our **M3s to M8s** play in the East and travel between Stratford and Southend. Southend is not ideal but manageable. A league between Stratford and Chelmsford would be ideal. The new sub-areas suggested are, as with the ladies, very unattractive. Either travel is extended to Ipswich (and Ipswich teams have to travel to East London) or we are stuck in the M25 belt (with only 7 of our current 20 East opponents) and no longer playing any of our Essex or Stratford neighbours.

Again there are far too few teams. We would have 7 teams in just 3 divisions instead of across 12 divisions. A pool of 144 teams would be reduced to 36. The standard between the current 12 East divisions is massive. Having teams of such varying quality play in just 3 divisions would be no fun for anyone. This needs to be rethought completely.

**As a general point**, splitting the East SW divisions and putting some clubs in Central London, some in London NE and some in East SW will totally change the way in which teams in the East (both men and women) have enjoyed their hockey for many years. For those actually playing hockey there is no compelling reason to change what works well.

As a rough calculation across the men’s and ladies sides we would no longer have fixtures with no fewer than 17 local clubs (14 of which will remain in the East Leagues and 3 move to Central London) if we move to London NE.

As planned, both Wapping and East London (together 15 teams) who play in the East leagues will be moved into Central London and we would no longer play them.

As you would expect, we monitor the requirements and progress of all our teams and plan for the future. This involves considering in detail the requirements of our members. Travelling is clearly a consideration and we have through the East Leagues (as constituted) good access to many local clubs which will be severely reduced by the current proposals. As importantly we have a choice of playing In London Leagues or the East Leagues as a whole. Now we would be left with just the choice of two small and unviable sub-areas.

Incidentally, there does not seem to be any guidance around the ability of teams within the lower levels of the structure to select their competition area which has been raised by a number of clubs as a real concern. If the chosen sub-area proved to be unpopular with teams could they move? Clubs not only need to understand what they can decide but also need to understand what other clubs are doing.

**Colts**

Our **Colts** want to play the best teams they can not just the ones closest to us. The Mercian League for the boys and the Home Counties Leagues for the girls help to achieve that objective and provide important flexibilities that work well for junior hockey.

The EH competitions keep on changing but currently do not provide the most suitable opposition. There are no regular leagues and whether we play home or away matches is a lottery. We need to arrange friendlies regularly to play against suitable opposition outside of the Mercian League competitions.

We cannot see how the new proposals to restrict colts to one area would benefit any colts’ teams which want to play teams of similar quality.

Within East there are a number of clubs with very good junior sections but we also play Surbiton, Reading, Canterbury et cetera and would want to continue to do so. Creating much smaller areas and then subdividing them still further will reduce opportunities and if players are unable to play teams at the right level they will leave to find somewhere where they can. We obviously do not want that to happen.

At present the top two teams in each region play in the National finals both at indoor and outdoor tournaments. It is not unusual for two of the four finalists to come from the same region. Under the new proposals only one club might represent each area. We do not think it would be right to prevent the best teams playing in National championships as a result of creating extra areas.

How will the proposals affect the Futures Cup? The Futures Cup has always worked well with only four subdivisions. Why would we need 8?

**Mini**

Our **Mini** players play in the Essex leagues and in local tournaments. It is not at all clear what would happen at u8, u10 and u12 level. If the Essex leagues are disbanded would our Mini teams only be able to play in the SW East or NE London sub-areas?

Will Mini teams even be affected by the proposed changes? It is not clear.

**Masters**

Our **Supervets** play in the over 50’s London League which, along with the over 60’s League, is very competitive and produces high level Masters hockey. These leagues are the envy of many in the Country. EH has indicated its wish to see Masters hockey grow. At present few clubs play and the London League helps facilitate good competition. Travel across London is not ideal but players do so because the opponents are like minded, of a similar high standard and with good facilities.

It is not clear what will happen to these well established and successful Leagues. The new structure does not seem to cater for Masters hockey in any detail.

**Administration**

The Regions and Counties have been administered effectively in the interests of members by volunteers for years as has the East League and the London League.

It is proposed to disband 5 regional bodies and replace them with 8 new bodies. Those who have volunteered for years will most probably find the change to be the catalyst to retire gracefully. Where in practice will EH find enough people of the right calibre to volunteer to take on these new roles?

**Umpires**

The Essex Umpires Association works effectively and efficiently. It appears that it will be abolished for no other reason than to conform to the new structure. It is not clear how and on what basis it will be replaced. From what we have been told this suggestion is deeply unpopular. It is not clear how and on what basis the current well run administration will be replaced. Many members (valuable participating umpires) may feel disincentivised by the proposals and decide to stand down. Meetings (previously in Essex) may become too far to travel to. Demotivating umpires is one of the last things we need to do. No umpires, no hockey.

If we are to vote on proposals for umpires we have to be able to understand what will happen in practice. It is not sufficient to look at the theory. The publication of the indicative leagues has shown clearly that what seemed potentially attractive in theory just does not work in practice.

**The Process and uncertainty**

Through no fault of England Hockey, engagement and understanding from clubs has been and is still very limited. This is reflected in the December 2019 proposal. With the proposals comprising 70 pages and the draft adult league structure for 2020-22 comprising 53 pages (although in the latter only certain sections are relevant to each club) there is clearly a strong argument to achieve a wider detailed understanding before irrevocable steps are taken. As you have stated, there is a need for more work on the detail/discussion with local clubs and league organisers. This needs to take place before not after resolutions are passed.

At the moment, we have not seen the terms of the proposed resolution but we believe the effect will be that once passed there will be no turning back and the timetable in the proposal will be followed. There is simply not enough time to produce any revisions to the current proposal or further necessary details so clubs will be presented with a proposal that is in critical areas unsatisfactory and unclear.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Club supports the objective of EH to standardise rules and regulations and to introduce consistent procedures across England.

For the reasons stated the Club cannot support the proposals to replace the existing structures and leagues with 8 new areas each with 4 new sub-areas.

We wanted to support the proposals but cannot, on behalf of our members, recommend a change which;

1. would restrict opportunities to play and participate; and
2. is likely to result in our Club and other local clubs losing members; and
3. could undermine our ability to finance our club and preserve and replace our existing facilities.

Please do not try to push these proposals through on the basis that things can be sorted out later. We really do not want a Brexit situation with a resolution being passed before the detail is agreed. Please accept that the changes will not have the intended consequences and please be prepared to stand up and say that you have listened to your members and decided to take one step at a time and to defer the proposals for structural change.

We realise how unpopular this recommendation will be given the huge amount of work carried out to date but surely it is worth waiting another six months or even another season to get something as important as this right.

Management Committee

Old Loughtonians Hockey Club Limited

9 January 2020