

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

APPEALS COMMITTEE

In the matter of an appeal by COAGH UNITED FOOTBALL CLUB ("the Appellant") against a decision made by the NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION ("the Respondent").

Appeal Board

Steven Keenan

Rachel Best KC

Rodney McVitty

Attendees:

1. The Appellant was represented by Carla Dallas (Club Secretary) and Joe McFadden (Coach).
2. The Respondent was represented by Valerie Heron (Chairperson), Patricia McCullough (Vice Chairperson) and Collette Young (Secretary).
3. The Panel wishes to express its gratitude to the parties for their attendance at the hearing and for their written and oral submissions.

Background

4. This appeal relates to the Respondent's decision not to accept the Appellant's application to join the Respondent's league for the 2025 season.
5. The Respondent's decision not to accept the Appellant's application was based on the fact that they were of the opinion that the "*NIWFA league Entry - New Team Criteria*" for 2025 was not met as the Appellant did not have a "*minimum of one girl's youth team playing in an affiliated league*".

Arguments raised on Appeal by the Appellant

6. The Appellant raised the following arguments in the content of their appeal letter and during their submissions at the Appeal Hearing; as to why they felt they had met the criteria to join the NIWFA league for the 2025 season and furthermore that the decision making process by the Respondent was unfair and inconsistent.

(a) The NIWFA Committee would like to hear from any football club wanting to enter a new team in the NIWFA ladies' national league for the 2025 season

The Appellant's submissions

The Appellant submitted that they were a new team and furthermore suggested that they had appointed management who had experience with another Ladies team within the NIWFA structure and had a core of players that had been training twice a week since October 2024, with further new players keen to join the team.

(b) The NIWFA Committee can only accept clubs into the league which we consider to have sufficient capacity to ensure that their team is not only able to fulfil all fixtures, but is represented at league meetings and is well organised. The Committee must therefore be satisfied that a prospective club has sufficient player numbers, facilities, staff and finance, a youth structure and it will also take into

account the effect on established local clubs already in membership

The Appellant's submissions

The Appellant set out that they currently have 24 ladies training with their team which was more than sufficient numbers to form a team in their opinion and had established a separate Ladies Committee within the club structure while at the same time being able to benefit from the governance of the overall Appellant Football Club

The Appellant added that their club had been formed 54 years ago and had teams competing in the NIFL Premier Intermediate League, Mid Ulster leagues at reserve and U19 level and currently had 248 children registered in their youth academy. They have 4 youth teams competing in Mid Ulster Youth League U11, U12, U14 and U16 and have 6 teams competing in the IFA Small Sided Games ("SSG") programme each week. They also confirmed that they have 2 girls teams competing in the SSG programme each week and regularly organise friendlies with other clubs for the teams who are not currently competing in leagues.

The final point made under this limb of their submission was that they were very much an established local club in their area.

- (c) **The NIWFA gave the reason for refusal as *"while the Committee was pleased to hear about your girls participating in football programmes, we regret to inform you that these are not affiliated leagues. As such the mandatory criteria for admission to our league have not been met"...***

The Appellant's submissions

The Appellant set out that in their opinion at no point did the initial criteria ask for a prospective club to have girls teams; it only referred to youth teams.

The Appellant also wanted to set out that they do have girls teams playing in the SSG and a thriving youth academy.

In respect of the criteria, the Appellant then drilled down further into this point by setting out that the NIWFA League Rules do not specify that clubs must have girls teams competing in an affiliated league, as a requirement for their member clubs. They added that the only criteria asked for was listed in the Invitation of Expressions of Interest, to which the Appellant will say they have met.

In their final point the Appellant also set out that upon a review of the teams currently under the NIWFA umbrella, there were a number of teams who do not adhere to the criteria used to refuse the Appellant's application.

Within their submissions they informed the panel of a lack of consistency, setting out the following facts:

- 5 teams currently competing in NIWFA with girls teams competing only at SSG level
- 3 teams currently competing in NIWFA with no girls teams
- 2 teams currently competing in NIWFA with no youth structure
- 5 teams currently competing in NIWFA with no affiliated parent club.

Arguments raised by the Respondent to the Appellant's appeal

Within their response letter, the Respondent did set out that the NIWFA was committed to raising the standards in their league, and the committee has worked with the IFA over the last two years to introduce Minimum Operating Standards (MOS) for existing clubs and entry criteria for new clubs wishing to enter the league to ensure that they are sustainable and have the correct youth pathway in place.

While the Respondent had sight of the Appellant's appeal letter and exhibits; they did not specifically respond to arguments set out by the Appellant, instead, setting out a timeline of what had taken place from the start of the invitation process for new teams; which the Appeals panel did not find of assistance in addressing the issues raised by the Appellant.

At the Appeal hearing the Respondent did however make further submissions which the Appeals panel would summarise as follows:

- While it was accepted that the social media post set out expressions of interest for new teams, the Respondent suggested that the social media post asked clubs to contact the NIWFA secretary for further information, at which stage the entry criteria would have been issued. The Respondent set out that the mandatory criteria would have then been made available.
- The Respondent looked to focus on the fact that the league entry Criteria related to new clubs and indeed referred to section 4 of their criteria entitled "Club Development"; which set out the mandatory requirement of a *"minimum of one girls' youth team playing in an affiliated league"*.
- They accepted that although on the face of their criteria according to them, the Appellant did not meet the mandatory criteria, they still offered them an interview along with other potential entrants into the league. The Respondent suggested that this is because sometimes at interview there is further evidence that comes out which is relevant to the decision making process.
- The Respondent accepted that there are teams currently within their structure that only compete at SSG level, have no girls teams, have no youth structure and have no affiliated parent clubs. The Respondent's position is that each year their criteria changes and that they are pushing their current clubs within their structure who do not meet the current criteria to do so; however they could not elaborate on this further.
- The Respondent provided the panel at the appeal hearing the notes and indeed scoring summary for the Appellant's application/interview. While totalling a score of 75, which sat within a scoring matrix of 65-84 which suggested 'meets most requirements a viable candidate with room for improvement', the recommendation of the Respondent to the application was *"No, as no girls' youth set up – mandatory criteria."*

Observations

The panel was unanimously of the opinion that the Respondent should consider the current process that they have in place for selecting new entrants into the NIWFA league format.

Having considered the evidence presented before the panel, they would make the following observations:

- i. There is a lack of consistency in the wording and terminology used by the Respondent in support of their selection process. For example there is both reference to the acceptance of new "teams" and new "clubs" to join the league format. This has clearly caused confusion and a lack of clear understanding for applicants of what is required to join the league for the 2025 season.
- ii. The criteria which has been selected for the 2025 season shows potential unfairness to some applicants, including the Appellant. The appeals panel would suggest that the decision to admit a second and third team from clubs already involved in the NIWFA league format during the 2025 selection process; that already does not adhere to the what is being requested of new entrants into the league, represents a two tier approach. While the appeal panel understands that Respondent wants to make sure that new entrants have the ability to sustain at the very least one team within their league format; we would suggest that the current criteria is preventing more women's teams for joining the NIWFA format, particularly as in the

Appellant's position, there is a lack of opportunity to participate in senior women's football in their surrounding area. It was also suggested during the submissions of the Respondent that 24 players was not sufficient to have a sustainable team within their league format. The Appeals panel was surprised by this statement, which was made without any supporting evidence and indeed is not accepted by the panel.

- iii. The Panel also found it difficult to understand why the Respondent would invite the Appellant to interview if they were of the opinion that they would not be accepted into the league in any event due to a failure to meet their mandatory criteria. The Panel would suggest that due diligence should have been carried out prior to any interview stage taking place. This again, in the panel's opinion, showed a lack of a coherent and consistent approach that could be understood by all parties involved in the selection process from the outset.

Decision

As per Article 14 6 (f) of the Irish Football Association's Articles of Association, the Appeals panel may take any step which, in the exercise of its discretion, they consider appropriate in order to deal justly with the case in question.

The Appeals panel have opined as follows:

1. The application of the Appellant to join the NIWFA should be returned to the Respondent for reconsideration.
2. If the Respondent remains of the opinion that the Appellant does not meet the appropriate criteria to join the NIWFA format; then the Appellant is afforded the opportunity to appeal that decision.
3. The £100.00 fee paid by the Appellant for this appeal, should be returned to the Appellant.

The Appeals Board