

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:

Carley Shields

Mervyn Wheatley

Kieran McMahon

Attendees:

1. The Appellant was represented at the hearing by Carla Dallas (Club Secretary) & Joe McFadden (Coach).
2. The Respondent was represented at the hearing by Patricia McCullough (Vice Chair), Valerie Heron (Chair), David Heron (Committee member) and Colette Young (Secretary).
3. The Board thanked the parties for their written and oral submissions and for their attendance at the hearing.

Background:

4. The appeal is against a decision of the Respondent made on 18 February 2025 to reject the Appellant's application to join the Northern Ireland Women's Football Association League ('the League') after the Respondent was directed to re-consider their decision by the Appeal Board on 3 February 2025.

Points raised on appeal:

5. The Appellant made the following key points:
 - a. It was not aware that there was mandatory criteria to be followed due to the confusing and contradictory advertisements seeking new applicant teams.
 - b. There are a significant number of teams already competing in the League with either no affiliated girl's teams, no SSG girl's teams and some with no youth structure whatsoever.
 - c. Three teams were accepted into the 2025 intake, one of which has no youth structure and two who only have girls playing at SSG level (the same as the Appellant) but the reason given was that they already have other teams in the League.
 - d. Criteria, which was stated to be applicable to all new teams, was not fairly and consistently applied.
 - e. The Appellant has twenty four ladies training with their club, so more than sufficient numbers to form a team.

- f. The IFA has recently launched its Women and Girls Strategic Plan to promote, foster and increase participation in women's football. The Appellant says that their club is ready to go and their players just want to play.
6. The Respondent made the following key points:
 - a. The Appellant acknowledged at the first appeal hearing that the mandatory criteria document had gone into their junk folder and if they had seen it at the time, they would not have appealed the Respondent's decision.
 - b. The Appellant failed to comply with the mandatory criteria and the Respondent has applied this criterion consistently to all clubs.
 - c. The reserve teams admitted for 2025 are not new clubs but additional teams from existing League member clubs, who had met the criteria applicable at the time of their original entry.
 - d. Two other clubs were also declined for not meeting the same mandatory criteria, demonstrating fairness and consistency.
 - e. A Committee meeting was held on 14 February 2025 to consider the direction of the previous Appeal Board when the Committee unanimously agreed that they had applied their criteria accurately, appropriately and equally and that they did not need to change their decision, as doing so would contradict their own agreed mandatory criteria.
 - f. The Pathway League currently has five clubs, so it would have been easier to accept the Appellant to make it six, but to allow them entry would go against the rules established.

Analysis:

7. The Appeal Board considered carefully the points made by both parties, however of most concern was the fact that the criteria set out to determine entry to the League was not applied consistently by the Respondent to all those who applied.
8. The Respondent confirmed that reserve teams were treated separately as additional teams within existing NIWFA member clubs, which had previously met entry requirements under earlier standards. The Appeal Board established during the hearing that nowhere was this set out or stated to be the position, with a clear rationale as to why, to those who applied to gain entry to the League.
9. The Respondent confirmed that the League entry criteria is updated every year. In the Appeal Boards opinion, this means that the criteria should be applied equally and consistently to all who apply in a particular year, whether or not they are an existing team within NIFWA member clubs in the interests of fairness.
10. The Respondent claims that the mandatory requirement of having a '*minimum of one girls' youth team playing in an affiliated league*' demonstrates a commitment to women's football as the objective is to have clubs that will not fold. The Appeal Board asks why then is that requirement not applied to existing clubs when it comes to goals of sustainability?

11. The Appeal Board asked for sight of the application form completed by the Appellant. This was provided by the Respondent and having considered same, the Appeal Board notes that the key question on the form pertaining to the mandatory criteria was phrased as follows – *'In what junior/youth league has your team(s) played?'* making no reference to the words 'female', 'girls', 'ladies' or 'women's' unlike other questions on the form.
12. The Appellant is clearly a club who is ready and willing to join the League and has players eager to play football.
13. Given all of the above, the Appeal Board is of the opinion that the Respondent has not fairly and consistently applied the criteria that governs entry to the League.
14. Therefore, in accordance with Article 14(6)(f) of the IFA's Articles of Association, the Appeal Board has decided to allow the appeal and directs that the Appellant should be admitted to the League with immediate effect. The Appeal Board considers that this is appropriate in order to deal justly with the case in question.

Dated: 12 March 2025

Carley Shields

On behalf of the Appeal Board