



**England
Rugby**

**RFU MEN'S LEAGUES
PRE-SEASON BRIEFING
2026-27**

1. INTRODUCTION

This document has been produced to assist teams ahead of the 2026-27 season. In this briefing, you will find key information relating to RFU Men's Leagues, as well as details on Adult Player Registration and other important topics.

If there is any conflict between this document and Regulation 6 or Regional Organising Committee (ROC) Admin Instructions, then Regulation 6 or the ROC Admin Instructions will take precedence.

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2. KEY CHANGES FOR 2026-27

○ **Regional 1 Replacements Pilot**

This pilot is in place following the regional club consultation webinars that were ran both mid-way through and at the end of last season. For more information please see the link below – including what is required of all Regional 1 clubs as part of the pilot.

[Regional 1 Replacements Pilot](#)

○ **Player Off Infographic**

Please see below an updated Player Off Infographic, which details the process to be followed if Clubs at Level 5 and below:

- a. fail to replace the required number of front rows at the first time of asking; OR
- b. if they have replaced the required number of front rows at the first time of asking, what happens if it is necessary to replace a front row forward with no other front row replacement available.

In line with World Rugby Law 3, at Level 5 and below you have to replace a prop **or** a hooker at the first time of asking. Clubs are advised to check the regulations and laws of the game for absolute clarity.

In the National Leagues, you are required to replace a prop **and** a hooker at the first time of asking. A specific Player Off infographic will be provided to National League Clubs directly in due course.

[Player Off Infographic](#)

○ **Counties 1 Promotion Playoffs**

In order to determine the 5 2nd placed teams in Counties 1 that will be promoted up into Regional 2, there will now be 2 rounds of playoffs played after the end of the league season. For more information, including which leagues will play each other, please look up [Regulation 6, Appendix 6.9](#)

○ **Player Movement Between Adult Male XVs**

The document linked below are the administrative instructions with relation to clubs with multiple teams in the Men's RFU League Structure, and how player movement should work between those teams in order to maintain competition integrity.

[Player Movement Between Adult Male XVs](#)

○ **Useful Links**

- [2026-27 Regional League Information](#)
- [2026-27 Structured Season Updated \(post-drought\)](#)

3. ALLOCATION OF CLUBS TO NATIONAL 2 AND REGIONAL LEAGUES FOR SEASON 2027-28

Allocation of Clubs to National 2 Leagues for Season 2027/28

Following the completion of the league programme and play-offs in accordance with applicable regulations at the end of Season 2026/27, and once promotion and relegation has been finalised, Clubs being promoted to, or remaining in, National 2 West, North and East will be allocated to leagues in accordance with the below criteria (as applicable). If clubs have any queries in relation to the criteria, please contact the Competitions Team via Competitions-Development@RFU.com.

National League 2:

- National League Rugby (NLR) remains committed, where practically possible, to club sustainability and to minimise the travel burden for Clubs and players across the country. In the first instance, this process will be completed utilising the status quo of 3 x 14-club leagues as agreed by the NLR Executive Committee.
- Teams shall be grouped geographically across the country, and the process is refreshed annually to continually minimise travel. 'Lowest Total Mileage' calculations may be utilised to complete the requisite number of clubs in each league.

This process will likely draw towards a similar convergence of the three leagues as in recent seasons. At this point, Governance, upon recommendation from the NLR, will utilise their discretion to apply variations for the benefit of the game of rugby union overall in the locality. This will include, where possible, the sharing of any perceived burden of excessive travel by allocation of a club to 2 East or 2 West.

- Where:
 - a. in the opinion of Governance (and in consultation with NLR); and
 - b. having following the process set out above,

the convergence of the three leagues is such that the principles of club sustainability and minimisation of the travel burden for Clubs and players across the country cannot be equitably managed (as between Clubs) by applying variations for the benefit of the game of rugby union overall in the locality), Governance shall reserve the right to make and/or recommend such amendments to league distribution, allocation and/or league sizes for Season 2027/28 as it considers fit so long as such changes achieve the original objectives of:

- maintaining club sustainability and minimising the travel burden for Clubs and players across the country; and
- maintaining a maximum 26-match programme across the regular league season. For the avoidance of doubt, this number will not include Play-Off Semi-Finals or Finals or any applicable Accession Finals.
- In either case, the Rugby Competitions Landscape Project will make recommendations to determine how the transition to any new structure is regulated.

Allocation of Clubs to Regional 1 and 2 Leagues for Season 2027-28

All Clubs shall be allocated to leagues in accordance with RFU Regulation 6, Appendix 2.2 under the criteria laid down below. Any such decision will be final and therefore not open to appeal.

- Teams at each level shall be grouped geographically across the country and the process is refreshed annually to continually aid club sustainability with league stability and minimised travel.
- 'Lowest Total Mileage' calculations may be utilised to complete the requisite number of clubs in each league.
- Where two Clubs have an identical Lowest Total Mileage (within 2%) a club competing in the same league in the previous season shall have precedence to remain there, otherwise it shall be the highest placed club.
- A club shall be exempt from being moved leagues AT THE SAME LEVEL for a second (or more) consecutive season unless that club agrees to such a move.
- In exceptional circumstances the Committee may in its discretion vary the above criteria for the benefit of the game of rugby union overall in the locality

4. RELEGATION FROM COUNTIES 1 AND BELOW LEAGUES (POTENTIAL CASCADE EFFECT)

Relegation from the Counties One leagues at the end of each season will vary in accordance with Regulation 6, Appendix 2, Paragraph 4. Two factors determine where these relegations will fall:

- i) The number of clubs relegated from the Regional Leagues into each of the Counties One leagues. Clubs are relegated into the Counties One league consistent with their CB affiliation (for league purposes).
- ii) Which of the Counties One leagues provide the 5 x promoted runners-up at the conclusion of the runners-up play-offs. This will reduce the relegation from each of those leagues by a single club.

The potential relegation ranges from each Counties One league for season 2026-27 are as below:

Counties One Leagues	Potential Relegation	
	Max.	Min.
2026-27		
Tribute Ale Western West	3	0
Tribute Ale Western North	6	0
Tribute Ale Southern South	5	0
Tribute Ale Southern North	6	0
Hertfordshire	3	1
Eastern Counties	4	0
Essex	3	0
Kent	4	0
Surrey/Sussex	8	0
Middlesex	4	0
Hampshire	4	0
Midlands West (North)	3	1
Midlands West (South)	3	1
Midlands East (North)	3	1
Midlands East (South)	3	1
adm Lancashire/Cheshire	3	1
Cumbria	4	0
Yorkshire	3	2
North East	4	0

The exact number of clubs relegated from a Counties One league may not be known until the conclusion of the runners-up play-offs. The higher the maximum figure is the less likely it is to happen but it will nevertheless remain a mathematical possibility.

The impact of relegation from Counties One will continue down through the leagues in each respective CB leg.

5. ELECTRONIC MATCH CARD (EMC)

Please find further information about the EMC in the link below:

<https://help.rfu.com/support/search/solutions?term=Electronic%20Match%20Card>

With the increased use of GMS across the Game, we will be putting in place additional support measures, as per previous seasons to support 'peak season' to deliver an improved level of Technical Support, during such time.

Operational Hours		
July to August	Monday to Friday	9am – 5pm
07-17 th September	Monday- Thursday	9am – 5pm
21 st September to October	Monday to Friday	9am – 7pm
September to October	Saturday and Sunday	9am – 7pm

Calls over peak period

This process will be in place from the 4th September 2026 to mid/end October 2026 (to be monitored over the tail end of the peak period). The phoneline will be open Friday evenings, Saturday and Sunday business hours.

Phoneline hours (from 4th September)

Fridays: 5pm – 7pm

Saturdays & Sundays: 12pm – 7pm

GMS Service desk number: 02088317764

The GMS service desk number above is to be used by Club Administrators and Match Card Administrators for any match day queries, such as:

- EMC (Electronic Match Card)
- Match day selection for the teams
- Adult Registration (something is preventing the player from being selected for the match)
- Competition issues and submitting the match card.

The phoneline is not for general use. It is only for the above purposes.

6. REPORTING RESULTS

The results of all RFU League games should be reported by 17:30h for afternoon fixtures or 22:00h for evening fixtures. If for any reason you cannot do this via the Electronic Match Card (EMC) you must contact your results agent as listed in your regional admin instructions by the above deadlines.

If a match is postponed, abandoned, or a walkover you should NOT complete an EMC but contact the results agent and your league secretary with the details as soon as they are known.

7. ADULT PLAYER REGISTRATION

All players playing XV-a-side contact rugby, at RFU member clubs, are required to be registered to play. This is in line with Regulations 13 & 14.

EXISTING PLAYERS (*staying with the same club*)

Players should renew their registration, using [this](#) guidance in doing so

Please note: Any players wishing to move clubs over the summer (in between Levels 3 & 8) will no longer need to renew at the former club and then be transferred. They can now register afresh with their new club, using [this](#) guidance to support them. Any players at levels 9 and below can continue to benefit from up to two active Club Registrations across two different clubs. Players can change these clubs, should they wish

NEW PLAYERS (*New to Adult Registration or moving clubs without transferring*)

For all players **new** to Adult Registration, they should firstly Club Register with their adult club. They can use [this](#) guidance to help them. If these players require RFU Registration, to be eligible to play in RFU Leagues between levels 3 and 8, Adult Male Registrars can uplift these players to RFU Registration, using [this](#) guide to support them in the process

For those players who are moving/adding clubs and currently **DO NOT** have an active RFU Registration, they should Club Register with their new/additional club, using [this](#) guide to support them along the way

8. SANCTIONS RELATED TO NON-REGISTERED PLAYERS

The player registration process requires all players to register prior to the start of the season. For Premiership level to Counties 2 men, and Premiership level to NC2 women, only registered players will be able to be selected on the match card.

1. If there are players who take part in a match at these levels, whilst not being registered, then this may result in them being considered ineligible players and a sanction of 5 match points could be applied to the team.
2. Clubs have informed us that league integrity is essential and therefore sanctions will be applied at these levels from the start of the season. Players **MUST** be registered to their club before the game and correctly added to the match card.
3. For teams that play at levels below this, i.e. below Counties 2 men and NC2 women, there is still a requirement for players to be registered, however, the names may be added to the match card within 48 hours of the match.

The RFU teams are available to provide any support that you may need in registering players (**resources noted in the section above**) so please contact them should you need any assistance.

9. TRAVEL FUNDING FOR 2026-27

The travel funding policy and support for teams playing in the 2026/27 RFU Leagues will be as follows:

For offshore travel, eligible Men's and Women's teams required to travel offshore to the Channel Islands or Isle of Man will receive £3000 to support their costs, an increase of 50% from the 2025/26 season. Teams travelling to the Isle of Wight will also receive a payment administered through Hampshire CB as per recent seasons. Some additional conditions surround travel to and from Jersey in Men's National Leagues and those clubs have been contacted directly.

For onshore travel, support will be provided to teams in all leagues who have excessive travel to participate in the leagues, and to particularly compensate teams for the excess travel costs above the average, or threshold, for that league level. A payment will be made on a per mile basis for every mile travelled above the league level average (minimum compensation in place to avoid very small payments). Teams in receipt of onshore travel funding were informed of their funding levels in mid-July. Teams not contacted were not eligible or did not reach the appropriate thresholds.

All travel funding payments should have hit club accounts on 31st July.

A reminder that any clubs that have exceeded the RFU payment of players thresholds will lose access to any travel funding (as well as other RFU benefits).

Further information can be found in the following link:

<https://help.rfu.com/support/solutions/articles/103000360748-travel-funding-policy-2025-26>

10. REGULATION UPDATE REMINDER

The RFU Governance Standing Committee (the “Committee”) put in place a new regulation review strategy in the 25-26 season which runs until the end of the 27-28 season (the “Strategy”). The objective of the Strategy is to develop and implement regulations which:

- a. are necessary, proportionate and pragmatic;
- b. achieve the agreed objectives of the relevant regulation and which acknowledge the audience to whom they apply;
- c. adopt a structured, targeted and periodic review of regulations where necessary and in response to feedback from the Game; and
- d. support the RFU’s overall ambition to encourage more rugby to be played in a safe, fair and enjoyable way.

The table below sets out an executive summary of the key changes which have the more material impact on the Game and on volunteer burden. The below provides a summary but for more detail, please also refer to the full regulations which are available on the website effective from 1 August 2026:

<https://www.englandrugby.com/governance/rules-and-regulations>

Regulations 6 (Adult Competitions)	The Adult Competitions Management Sub-Committee (and the Organising Committee Sub-Committee) have proposed minor changes to Regulation 6 this season, the majority of which are to ensure clarity, aid competition management and league administration. These include: (a) the implementation of regulations covering the trial to take place in Season 2026/27 which will permit up to 5 replacements in Regional 1; (b) the introduction of a structured delegation to league organisers/bodies able to make decisions on pitch sizes (in accordance with the Laws of the Game) at each level of the men’s and women’s game, with a right of review to the Committee where necessary; (c) the introduction of a visual aid to outline the “player-off” rule / uncontested scrums; and (d) clarifying that at Women’s Level 5 and below, games may start with less than 15 but with no fewer than 10 players, in order to minimise the number of walkovers in games where teams arrive with less than 15 players. Additionally, after a successful first season utilising the play-off structure in the men’s game in National and Regional leagues set out in Appendix 6 to Regulation 6, the changes to the play-off structure in Season 2026/27 will be as follows: (a) in place of the Adult Male (Counties) Cup (in respect of which, see below), a series of play-offs between the runners up in each Counties 1 league to determine additional promotion to Regional 2 (which was previously conducted based on Best Playing Record); (b) the shortening of the play-offs in the Regional 2 Promotion play-offs. Last season this covered Clubs placed 2nd to 5th,
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	but due to take-up of games, this will now only cover Clubs based 2nd to 3rd; and (c) clarification on the priority of seeding based on league standing and the use of Best Playing Record to determine home ties in the Regional 1 and Regional 2 Play-Off Finals, as well as some clarificatory wording on consequential impacts to the play-offs if a Club 1st and 2nd XV end up in (or could end up in) the same league as a result of the play-offs. Appendix 2 (Men's Competition Structure) will continue to deal with automatic promotion and relegation in the RFU Leagues, whereas Appendix 6 will cater for any additional promotion and relegation by virtue of participation in the play-offs.
Regulation 7 (Player Approaches, Contracts, Payments and Player Movement)	The changes to Regulation 7 are principally to differentiate between the Men's and the Women's game in terms of Payment Thresholds and to clarify elements around loss of benefits to minimise impact on teams. The first change is to permit a "soft" cap of £10,000 for a Women's first XV (previously any costs or payments associated with the Women's side would be included in the overall total of the Men's side) and the second is to carve out the loss of travel funding from the Women's side if the Men's side loses RFU Benefits, and vice versa.
Regulation 9 (Player Safety)	To support compliance with key player safety principles, an escalating sanction table has now been developed (and enhanced following feedback from Governance and the Community Game Board during last season) to strengthen the ability to sanction for failing to meet key safety requirements and to increase deterrence. Particular attention is drawn to the sanction table which now sits at Appendix 1 to Regulation 9.
Regulation 14 (RFU Registration)	The changes to RFU Regulation 14 include clarity around Student / Services Passes after the Transfer Deadline and a discretion for the Head of Discipline to suspend player registrations in the professional game for failure to complete mandatory education topics as prescribed by the RFU. The permitted number of loan players / EAPs in a match day squad in Champ Rugby has also been updated in line with the Champ Rugby Regulations.
Regulation 15 (Age Grade Rugby)	Regulation 15 has been through a comprehensive review and re-write ahead of Season 2026/27. The key changes and principles are being communicated centrally to the Game, however for the purposes of this note, the main changes include: (a) a standard risk assessment for all Playing Out Of Age Grade, plus a 10-day approval window to reduce pressure on our volunteers; (b) the introduction of a dual girls' Under 11/12 age band, enabling players to play girls-only rugby at these ages if they want to. Mixed U11 rugby remains, so there's more choice and flexibility; (c) clearer guidance for clubs, schools and colleges around playing opportunities for PDG and Academy players, specifically around who makes those decisions. (d) the addition of a non-contact section to recognise and grow non-contact and T1 rugby as a key part of the age grade game. Regulation 15 has also been substantially re-written in line with the principles of the Strategy to make it easier to understand and to

		better reflect the audience to whom it applies. The regulation is supplemented with visual aids, charts and diagrams to outline key regulatory processes.
Regulation (Discipline)	19	These changes include: (a) the re-inclusion of wording regarding the Arbitration Act in the governing of RFU Disciplinary Panel and Appeal hearings; (b) the discretion to mandate education and/or training by the Head of Discipline regardless of any other disciplinary action; and (c) the ability for the RFU Head of Discipline to refer matters back to their original decision-makers (e.g. Disputes Committees) in the event it is considered that a potential appeal from such forums has a very high prospect of success.
Regulation 20 (Anti-Doping)		The Anti-Doping Regulations apply to all players and player support personnel and are fully aligned with the World Anti-Doping Code (the Code). The World Anti-Doping Code will be updated with effect from January 2027 (the 2027 Code). Regulation 20 has undergone a wholesale review ahead of Season 2026/27 to reflect the changes to be introduced as part of the 2027 Code, and has been fully approved by UK Anti-Doping.
Regulation (Safeguarding)	21	RFU Regulation 21 (Safeguarding) and the Safeguarding Children Policy have both undergone a substantive review ahead of Season 2026/27, which together deliver a clearer, more preventative and more transparent safeguarding framework. Regulation 21 has been comprehensively redrafted to improve understanding and consistency across the game, including the explicit introduction of suitability to work with children as a core safeguarding test, clearer safeguarding measures, and improved alignment with existing disciplinary processes under RFU Regulation 19. Both documents have been shaped by extensive consultation with safeguarding stakeholders across the game, with feedback strongly supporting the direction of travel, improved accessibility and values-led approach. The updated Policy sets out clear safeguarding intent and principles aligned to Rugby's Core Values, supported by separate procedures and guidance to provide practical direction for clubs and volunteers. Collectively, the changes are intended to strengthen governance, accountability and confidence in safeguarding delivery across rugby. For specific queries, please contact safeguarding@rfu.com.
Girls U16s and U18s National Cup		Including within this competition is the ability for "Cluster" teams to enter, provided they comply with relevant competition requirements and Regulation 15.
Adult Male (Counties) Cup		This competition has been removed from the Men's competition structure and therefore will not take place in Season 2026/27. At Counties 1 level, the competition has been replaced by a short play-off structure to determine promotion of Counties 1 runners-up to Regional 2 (see Regulation 6 box above).
Premiership Women's Rugby Regulations		Changes of note include:

	(a) reference to the addition of a PWR Club Loan Agreement for use in the context of overseas loans / transfers / international clearances (e.g. for Celtic Challenge); (b) the introduction of "Maternity Credits" within the EQP Protocol to support Clubs and their players; and (c) the requirement to declare any Travelling Reserves to support a data gathering exercise on the use of travelling reserves in the professional game. Similar provisions are included in the Champ and Prem Rugby regulations.
Champ Rugby Regulations	Changes of note include: (a) the bonus point system (one bonus point will be awarded to a team on each occasion it scores three or more tries more than the opposition. No bonus points will be awarded for just scoring four tries. League points for winning and drawing, and losing bonus points, remain unchanged); (b) clarification regarding eligibility of Loan Players and EAPs in all Champ Rugby play-offs (whereas previously this had only applied to the Champ Rugby Accession Final), including both how many such players are permitted and what they need to do in order to be eligible to participate in the play-offs; and (c) the removal of all previous commercial regulations which will now be housed in a separate Champ Rugby Commercial Handbook.