

NLR League 2 N/W Review

1. Introduction

I have been asked to review the decision taken by ACMSC on the allocation of clubs to the NLR level 2, and specifically the decision taken to allocate Lymm RFC, promoted from Regional 1NW, to National 2 West. I have heard from the Chairman of the ACMSC Terry Burwell, the Chairman, Secretary and Director of Rugby from Lymm, the Hon Secretary of National League Rugby Alan McCreddie and the Council Member for National League Rugby John Inverdale, the Chairman and Hon Secretary of Chester RFC and Paul O'Leary from the RFU. I was provided with expert advice from Paul Astbury of the London Regional Organising Committee who has had many years experience administering Adult Men's Leagues and is familiar with the current regulations, the previous regulations and the principles and decisions of the Future Competitions Structure process. I am grateful to everyone for their input and the clear way in which all views were expressed.

2. Background

Season 2022/2023 was the first season of a new structure for competitions in Men's Adult Community Rugby. Most leagues were reorganised, renamed and resized and new regulations were introduced to enact the principles of the Future Competitions Structure. These principles reflected what players, clubs and administrators said were their priorities and these were supported and agreed by the RFU:

- Reduce the number of games played in the interests of player welfare
- Give more free weekends to allow players time off to recover or pursue other activities, rugby or otherwise
- Reduce travel distance/time and allow for more local derbies

NLR was restructured to create National 1, a league of 14 teams (level 3), and National 2, three leagues of 14, split into North, West and South (level 4). At the end of the season there was relegation and promotion according to an agreed formula set out in RFU Regulation 6 Appendix 2, with one club promoted from the top of National 1 into the Championship, one club relegated from the Championship into National 1, three clubs promoted from the top of each of National 2 N, W and S into National 1 and the bottom two clubs relegated from each of National 2 N, W and S, (six in total) into Regional 1. One club from each of the six Regional 1 leagues were promoted and allocated to National 2N, W and S. There was no disagreement on who was promoted into National 2, the issue was the allocation of clubs into the three leagues. Lymm were promoted from Regional 1NW and allocated into National 2W. This decision was taken by ACMSC and communicated to the game on Wednesday 10th May.

3. Decision making Process

The decision on allocation of clubs to National leagues was taken initially by National League Rugby. I was told that there was some confusion as to who was responsible for the decision, but once this was confirmed, a proposed structure of

the three leagues for season 23/24 was provided to the ACMSC and this was the structure subsequently communicated to the game. In this proposal, Lymm were allocated to National 2W and Chester, which is 25 miles to the south west of Lymm, retained their position in National 2N. Chester told me they had been in this league (and its predecessor) for the last 10 years. The way the decision was taken was to compare the travel distance and time for each of Lymm and Chester to visit each of the 13 other clubs in National 2W using Google Maps or equivalent. Everyone I spoke to agreed that these travel distances were similar and, depending on the time the calculation was performed, either club would have to travel between 4,000 and 4,100 miles to fulfil their away fixtures. The main difference in views was on what basis the decision could be taken if travel distance was very close. I was told that “very close” is defined as less than 2% difference in total overall travel distance and I agree that this applies in this case.

There were two suggestions as to how to proceed in the case that distance travelled did not allow for a decision to be made between two clubs

1. Time taken to travel
2. Using the sequence set out for level transfers under the previous league structures

4. Time Taken to travel

The arguments in favour of using time to travel are that it is a more realistic measure of the intentions of the FCS - the inconvenience and opportunity lost to do other things is a function of the time taken, not the distance travelled. I was also told that time to travel is used as a determinative factor in the women's game. The arguments against time to travel are that it is less certain to determine in advance, varies greatly depending on a range of unpredictable and uncontrollable factors and is therefore more prone to challenge and disagreement. I am told that there is no precedent of using time travelled as a determinative factor in the men's leagues and while it has been discussed in the past, there has never been any agreement that it should be used for the reasons set out above.

Time to travel was used by NLR to make their original recommendation that Chester stay in National 2N and Lymm are allocated to National 2W. NLR compared both clubs in National 2W and used the route that gives the shortest time (which may increase the distance travelled). This produced a clear difference in total travel time between the two clubs of 4-5 hours over the season and would favour Chester remaining in 2N.

5. Using the sequence set out for level transfers

While level transfers no longer exist as such, the sequence of decision making was developed over a significant period of time and has been tested over that time in the men's game. The first criteria suggests that where two Clubs have an identical (less than 2% difference) Lowest Total Mileage the next consideration should be that the Club(s) with the Lowest Total Mileage in their “home” league should remain in that league and the other Club(s) shall be Level Transferred. Using this methodology Chester in National 2N would have a total travel distance of over

2500 miles and Lymm in National 2N would have a total travel distance of 2000 miles. This favours putting Lymm into National 2N and Chester into National 2W.

6. Other Options

It was suggested that both clubs could stay in National 2N as a 15 team league with N2W having either 13 or 14 teams. While this allows both Lymm and Chester to remain in the league to which they feel most regional affiliation and creates a new local derby, it would add another 4 weeks to the season (two additional matches and two additional break weekends as a result of there being an odd number of teams in the league) which would be counter to one of the core principles of the FCS review. A 13 team league would mean loss of revenue for all teams and a 14 team league would rely on reprieve for the bottom club with consequences for the league(s) below.

Another option that was suggested was that Lymm could refuse the promotion into National 2W and remain in their existing Regional 1 league. I explored this with the club and was told that this was not a route they thought would have the support of the club as they had worked hard to succeed in the league and achieve the promotion.

7. Other considerations

Lymm told me that the club has a strong ethos of home grown talent and doesn't pay players. Chester does pay its players and has around 30 contracted players. At the time of the review I was told that around half had committed to next season on the basis that Chester would be playing in National 2N. It was not clear whether any contracts for 23/24 had been signed and I was told none had been returned to the club. Both Lymm and Chester said that the longest trips in National 2W would mean an overnight stay on a Friday night and this could have an impact on the ability of the club to put out a side or attract players to the club.

8. Recommendation

Having listened carefully to everything I was told, it is clear to me that the issue was the lack of a clear process to decide on the allocation of teams into the three National Leagues following promotion and relegation. Different parties had used different methodologies and, perhaps unsurprisingly had come up with different results. I do not criticise any party for this but do make a recommendation that a clear and agreed methodology needs to be put into place before the end of the next season. In the absence of a clear process, having considered two alternative methodologies set out in paragraphs 4 and 5, I believe the fairest outcome is to remain with distance travelled as it is a predictable, tested and accepted methodology and to use the sequential process as set out in the previous regulation. This would put Lymm in National 2N and move Chester to National 2W.