

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

APPEALS COMMITTEE

In the matter of an appeal by **SHAMROCK FOOTBALL CLUB** ('the Appellant') against a decision made by **THE NORTHERN AMATEUR FOOTBALL LEAGUE LIMITED** ('the Respondent')

Appeal Board:

Carley Shields

Mervyn Wheatley

Peter Clarke

Attendees:

1. The Appellant was represented at the hearing by Paul Gibson (Committee member), Gerard Foster (Club Treasurer) and Martin Markey (Club Secretary).
2. The Respondent was represented at the hearing by Stephen Carlisle (Chairman) and Paul Cosby (Regulatory Committee Chair).
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 25 June 2025 revoking the Appellant's promotion to Section 1B of the Northern Amateur Football League on conclusion of the 2024/25 season.
5. On 3 June 2025 the Appeal Board provided two decisions. The first in relation to an appeal brought by Comber Rec against the Respondent and the second in relation to an appeal brought by Woodvale FC ('Woodvale'). Upon receipt of these decisions the Board of the Respondent instigated an investigation into the out-workings of those Appeals, the investigation concluding with the decision of the Respondent to accept and enact the outcome of the IFA Appeal Board ruling in providing a '*consistent approach*' following both decisions.
6. In respect of the Comber Rec decision, noting that the Appeal Board confirmed that no fine should be levied, or additional points deducted from Comber Rec, the consistent approach taken was that any Club who had received and paid a fine, or had additional points deducted, that each Club had that fine repaid, and those points previously deducted reallocated.
7. In respect of the Woodvale decision, noting that the Appeal Board confirmed that a 3-0 match award should be provided to Woodvale as a result of the opposition having been found to have played an ineligible player in the relevant fixture, the consistent approach taken was that in all instances where the Respondent had found that an ineligible player had taken part in a fixture, that match result be awarded to the opponents with a 3-0 score line, unless the existing score line was a better result.

8. The Appellant requests that the Respondent's decision of 25 June 2025 be overturned on the grounds that the Respondent has failed to provide an appropriate regulation on which to base their decision, has operated in a manner which exceeds their regulatory authority, has no basis in which to revoke the promotion of a club after declaration and has undermined the finality of competition outcomes bringing the game into disrepute.

Points raised on appeal:

9. The Appellant made the following key points:
 - a. The Respondent has no authority in which to retrospectively reorder final standings of clubs, particularly where the season has ended.
 - b. The Appellant seeks to rely on Bye-Law A 5.1.3 which states: *'The top two Clubs of Section C will be promoted to Section B.'*
 - c. The Appellant was not notified of any pending changes or provided with an opportunity to respond before the standings were altered and the decision made.
 - d. At no stage did the Appeal Board direct a retrospective review of the entire league nor do they have the power to do so.
 - e. The principle of finality is essential to the integrity of any competition.
10. The Respondent made the following key points:
 - a. The Respondent's actions demonstrate that a consistent approach has been taken complying with the wish of the Appeal Board that *'it is undesirable that there is an inconsistent approach.'*
 - b. At all times the Respondent's decisions have been based on the Bye-Laws and instruction of the IFA Appeal Board. The Respondent also confirmed that they were relying on Article 55.4 of their Articles of Association which states: *'The Board may deal with other matters touching or concerning the conduct of the business of the Company not provided for in these Articles or in the Bye-Laws.'*
 - c. Confirmation was provided by the Respondent that no formal declaration of promotion or relegation had been completed at the date of their submissions, and certainly not at the AGM, or as at 16 June 2025 when the Respondent's Board made their decision.
 - d. Post the Respondent's Board decision on 16 June 2025, the Respondent wrote to all impacted clubs inviting each to attend an information session, providing a week's notice. Those clubs impacted were provided with a one-to-one session with Directors of the Board on 24 June 2025. An information document was provided and the Appellant actively engaged with questions and comments. Formal communication was issued the following day on 25 June 2025.
 - e. The Respondent admitted that there had been a number of failures of the Management Committee that had created an imbalance of points awarded and felt that following the decisions of the Appeal Board on 3 June 2025 it was correct to take action if there had been a misapplication of the Rules.

Analysis:

11. The Appeal Board considered carefully the points made by both parties.
12. The Respondent confirmed that it had reviewed all matches of the 2024/25 season with a view to implementing changes following receipt of the two Appeal Board decisions and not just those involving Suffolk FC, the team guilty of fielding an ineligible player in the Woodvale decision.
13. The Respondent relied heavily on paragraph 16 of the Woodvale decision which stated: *'The Committee would wish to take this opportunity to urge the Leagues to deal with these matters on a consistent approach to ensure that Clubs have certainty in relation to the Rules and the approach adopted. It is undesirable that there is an inconsistent approach.'*
14. The Appeal Board noted that the Woodvale decision was in relation to a particular set of circumstances, one in which another case had been cited in support of the decision reached, that of Queen's Grads v the Respondent.
15. As is well recognised, the Appeal Board is not bound by precedent, however, that case is persuasive in relation to the particular circumstances at issue. As was stated in the Woodvale decision: *'In the aforementioned decision [Queen's Grad v the Respondent] the Appeals Committee found that the Respondent's interpretation of the relevant byelaws (the same as in this case) was correct. It was held that the fielding of an ineligible player in the games in question led to the inescapable conclusion that the match points gained should be reversed and awarded to the other side.'*
16. The Respondent confirmed that it is constantly striving to improve and that sporting integrity is at the heart of the actions it has taken, as certain clubs would have benefited to the detriment of others.

Decision:

17. Although the Appeal Board acknowledges that the Respondent had good intentions in acting as it did, the Appeal Board finds in favour of the Appellant and finds that the Respondent went too far in applying the outcome of the Woodvale decision to the results of the 2024/25 season.
18. Applying the outcome of the Woodvale decision and the precedent set in the case of Queen's Grads v the Respondent, the furthest the Respondent could have gone in terms of applying a consistent approach was to alter the points awarded to the opponents of the clubs who played the ineligible player, i.e. the opponents of Suffolk FC. Whether by conducting that exercise or only awarding the three points to Woodvale, the Appellant would still remain in second place in Section 1C, thereby being promoted to Section 1B in accordance with Bye-Law 5.1.3 for the 2025/26 season.
19. Although reference has been made by the Respondent to Article 55.4 of its Articles of Association, to go further is not a reasonable approach to ensure certainty and clarity for all clubs involved in the League, especially at this late stage in the season.

20. Given the above, in accordance with Article 14(b) of the IFA's Articles of Association, the Appeal Board has decided to uphold the Appeal by setting aside the decision appealed against.

Dated: 21 July 2025

Carley Shields

Vice Chair

On behalf of the Appeal Board