

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

APPEALS COMMITTEE

In the matter of an appeal by **ARDS RANGERS FOOTBALL CLUB** ('the Appellant') against a decision made by the **DOWN AREA WINTER FOOTBALL LEAGUE** ('the Respondent')

Appeal Board:

Carley Chapman

Mervyn Wheatley

Peter Clarke

Attendees:

1. The Appellant was represented by Gareth McCullough (Treasurer and Committee Member) and Andrew Tully (Committee Member) and the Respondent was represented by Ian Frazer (Chairman) and Alan Robinson (League Secretary).
2. The Appeal Board thanks the parties for their attendance and for their written and oral submissions. The Appeal Board would also like to note and commend the professionalism and curtesy displayed by both sides during the hearing.

Background:

3. This is an Appeal against a decision made by the Respondent on 17 February 2026 to disqualify the Appellant from the Billy Allen Memorial Shield ('the Competition') and impose a £50 fine due to a breach of Rule 15.2.3 of the Down Area Winter Football League Rules ('the Rules').
4. Rule 15.2.3 states: *'Prior to the quarter-final, semi-final and final, each player must have played at least one DAWFL league game for the Club represented in the Competition in the current season.'*
5. The relevant chronology is as follows:
 - a. On 7 February 2026 the Appellant played Vision Athletic in the quarter-final of the Competition and the Appellant won 6-5.
 - b. On 12 February 2026 the League Secretary of the Respondent contacted the Appellant regarding a potential breach of Rule 15.2.3 during the match against Vision Athletic.
 - c. On 13 February 2026 the Appellant responded, accepting that Rule 15.2.3 had been breached in respect of Alfie Clulow, who had not yet played at least one DAWFL league game for the club in the current season.
6. The Appellant's opponent in the quarter-final, Vision Athletic, were also found to have committed the same breach of Rule 15.2.3 in the same fixture and have similarly been removed from the Competition.

7. As a result, Ballynafeigh Breda Star ('Ballynafeigh'), who were scheduled to play the winner of the game between the Appellant and Vision Athletic in the semi-final, have been awarded a bye directly into the final.
8. However, Ballynafeigh has already received a bye in Round 1 of the Competition.

Points raised on appeal:

9. The Appellant made the following key points:
 - a. While Rule 15.2.4 does confer a power on the League Council to disqualify a player and remove a club from a competition failing satisfactory proof of eligibility, it contemplates the removal of a single club. It does not address the situation where both competing clubs in the same tie are removed simultaneously for the same breach.
 - b. The outcome for Ballynafeigh appears to have been determined under the Council's general discretion rather than any specific provision — and that discretion has been exercised in a manner that breaches Rule 15.1.6. Rule 15.1.6 states: '*A team shall not receive a bye in more than one round of the same knock-out competition in the current season.*'
 - c. Ballynafeigh received a bye in Round 1 of the Competition, therefore the Council's decision to remove both the Appellant and Vision Athletic from the Competition has given Ballynafeigh a second bye, this time into the final, which violates Rule 15.1.6.
 - d. The DAWFL Council's decision, however justified its reasoning in relation to the Rule 15.2.3 breach, cannot be implemented in a manner that creates a further, separate breach of the League's own rules.
 - e. The Appellant does not dispute that the Council had the authority to act. However, they argue that that discretionary power is not unlimited and cannot be exercised in a manner that itself creates a breach of an existing, unambiguous rule. By directing that Ballynafeigh advance to the final without playing a semi-final, the Council has used its discretionary authority under Rules 4.2.5 and 4.2.6 to produce an outcome that violates Rule 15.1.6. Rule 4.2.5 states that '*the League Council have the power to deal with any matter not covered by these rules.*'
 - f. The absence of a specific rule to cover this scenario gave the Council flexibility in choosing a remedy, but it did not give licence to breach a rule that is clearly in force. A compliant remedy was available, namely reinstatement of the Appellant or a replay of the quarter final.
 - g. Any argument that Round 1 constitutes a preliminary round outside the Competition, and therefore outside the scope of Rule 15.1.6, is inconsistent with the plain language of the Rules and would undermine the basis of the Rule 15.2.3 breach finding.
 - h. The distinction drawn between a bye and a walkover is not supported anywhere in the Rules.
10. The Respondent made the following key points:

- a. The Respondent will always deal with matters in accordance with Rule 1.3 which states: *'The overriding objectives of the League rules is to maintain and promote fair play. They seek to ensure that breaches are dealt with fairly, and that the image and reputation of the League and football are not adversely affected.'*
- b. The Respondent argues that a 'bye' is only applied to a team when a predetermined decision is taken to include byes before any draw is made for any cup competition.
- c. The round 1 draw for the start of the Competition involved all clubs and made provision for the first two teams to play a preliminary round to level off the numbers participating in round 1. There are no byes involved in the latter part of the Competition, as clubs progress by way of a walk over if sanctions are imposed against clubs or if the opposition folds the team.
- d. The Respondent agrees that the outcome of a club advancing to a final without playing a semi-final is not ideal, but many clubs across football have advanced by a walkover into the next round following a rules breach or a disciplinary code breach. In round 2 of the Competition a club had to advance by way of a walkover as their opposition folded during the season.
- e. The Respondent does not agree that it breached any rules in making its decision.
- f. Rule 15.2.4.1 creates a provision for the League Council to reinstate a club that had been defeated by a club who have been removed from the competition before the next round, but in this case the Appellant's opponent had breached the same rule so reinstatement was not an option.
- g. The Remedies sought by the Appellant could have a detrimental impact on the spirit and integrity of the Respondent's competitions whilst also potentially calling into question the League Council's integrity and confidence from other clubs.

Analysis:

11. The Appellant accepted that if it had been the only club to breach Rule 15.2.3 then it would be disqualified from the Competition, consistent with single breach cases. The difference here being that both teams breached Rule 15.2.3.
12. The Appeal Board accepts that the Respondent tried to do what it thought best to preserve the integrity of the Competition by disqualifying both clubs. It was a fair and reasonable decision.
13. However, by doing so, the Appeal Board agrees with the Appellant that there was therefore a breach of Rule 15.1.6, in that a team, in this case Ballynafeigh, would receive a bye in more than one round of the Competition.
14. The Appeal Board appreciates that the Respondent seeks to make a distinction between a 'bye' and a 'walkover' but the Appeal Board is of the opinion that that distinction is arbitrary. Further, there is no reference to the term 'walkover' in the Rules, nor is there a reference in the Rules to a particular stage or stages in the Competition as to when a bye can or cannot apply.

15. It is acknowledged by the Appeal Board that it is impossible for the Rules to cater for every eventuality, which is why there is usually a rule such as Rule 4.2.5 allowing the Council in this instance, to deal with any matter not covered by the Rules.
16. The Respondent made the very valid point that thirty-three clubs entered the Competition. Thirty-one of those clubs have adhered to the Rules and two did not. The Appeal Board is of the opinion that it would be difficult to justify either of those two clubs progressing to the next stage of the Competition.

Decision:

17. The decision of the Appeal Board is therefore to dismiss the Appeal.
18. However, in accordance with Article 14(6)(f) of the IFA Articles of Association, in order to preserve the integrity of the Competition, the Appeal Board directs that those teams who were defeated by the Appellant and Vision Athletic in the previous round, namely Ballyhalbert United and Bloomfield Thirds, be reinstated to the Competition to play each other in a quarter final, with the winner of that tie to play Ballynafeigh in the semi-final.

Dated: 5 March 2026

Carley Chapman

Vice Chair

On behalf of the Appeal Board