



# IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

## WOMEN'S CHALLENGE CUP COMPETITION RULES SEASON 2026

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## 1 Name

- a) The Cup shall be called the 'Irish Football Association Women's Challenge Cup' and shall be governed by the Women's Challenge Cup Committee, hereinafter known as the Committee.
- b) The Competition for the Cup shall be annual and shall be open to women's clubs in membership of the Irish Football Association.
- c) The Competition shall be conducted under the Articles of Association, the Laws of the Game, and these Rules.

## 2 Date of Application

- a) Application to compete in the Competition shall be made not later than 31 March in the year of the competition and must be accompanied by an entrance fee of £20. Each club shall be permitted to submit only one entry to the Competition.
- b) Any club with an outstanding fine relating to the previous season's competition will not be permitted to participate in the competition until their outstanding fine has been paid in full.

## 3 Committee may call upon players or clubs objected to for proof of qualification

Notwithstanding anything in any Rule, if the Committee has any doubt at any time and, whether arising out of a Protest or otherwise as to the qualification of any player taking part in the Competition, they shall have the power to call upon such player and/or Club to which they belong, or for which they played, to prove that they are qualified according to the rules. Any Club found guilty of fielding an ineligible player in any round of the competition may be fined up to the maximum sum of £50. In such circumstances the Committee shall have the power to reinstate the defeated team to the competition, providing that the following round has not taken place.

## 4 Eligible Players

- a) The competing teams shall consist of eleven players each. No individual shall play for more than one Club in the Women's Challenge Cup in the same season.
- b) A player shall be construed as taking part in the game for which they were nominated only if they have actually played in the game. For the avoidance of doubt, an unused substitute shall not be construed as having taken part in the game.
- c) To be eligible to play in the Women's Challenge Cup all players must be registered by their clubs in accordance with the IFA Professional Game Player Registration Regulations.

- d) For the avoidance of doubt, to be eligible to play in this competition a player must also be eligible to participate for their club in the relevant league competition.
- e) Clubs who play in a purely amateur league competition and who are permitted to register players to participate in such purely amateur competition outside the following registration periods shall not be permitted to play any player so registered in this competition until the commencement of the subsequent registration period.

The registration periods are:

**FIRST REGISTRATION PERIOD**

9 February – 30 April (5pm)

**SECOND REGISTRATION PERIOD**

1 July – 31 July (5pm)

- f) Any Amateur or Professional player registered by their club after 5pm on 31 July in the current season (including an 'Out of Contract Professional') will not be eligible to participate in the competition.

## 5 Completion of Team Lineup

- a) For each match, each club shall complete their official team sheet by including the names of players and Team officials and their functions taking part in (including the name of the nominated substitutes) and confirm the lineup via Comet FMS 60 minutes prior to kick-off.
- b) Players' names must correspond with the numbers assigned on the official team sheet. The Club Comet user shall be considered to verify the accuracy of the information provided on the team sheet via Comet FMS.
- c) Any club failing to provide such documentation by the stipulated deadline will be fined in the sum of £25 for each offence. Fines for Late Team Lineups will be administered via COMET FMS.

## 6 Substitutes

- a) A club may, at its discretion, use five substitute players at any time in any tie except to replace a player who has been expelled from the game by the referee. The substitutions can only be made when play has stopped, and the referee has given permission.
- b) Clubs may nominate a maximum of seven substitute players, from which five substitutions shall be permitted during the course of the game.
- c) Substitutions may be made on at most three occasions during the game.

- d) Exceptionally, a sixth substitute may take part exclusively during extra time in any match. One additional substitution window will be granted to each club should a match proceed to extra time.
- e) Substitutions made during half-time, between the end of normal playing time and extra time, and at half-time during extra time do not reduce the number of stoppages in play that can be used.

## 7 Replacement of Players on the Team Sheet

After the team sheets have been completed and submitted to the Comet Football Management System, and before the match has kicked off, the following shall apply:

- a) If any of the first eleven players named on the team sheet are not able to start the match due to unexpected physical incapacity, they can be replaced only by any of the seven (7) substitutes named on the confirmed team sheet. The substitute(s) in question can then be replaced by a player(s) not named on the initial team sheet, so that the quota of substitutes is not reduced. During the match, five (5) players can still be substituted. The replaced player(s) must be removed from the team sheet and not be available for selection for this fixture.
- b) If any of the seven (7) substitutes named on the team sheet are not able to be fielded due to unexpected physical incapacity, they can be replaced by any player not named on the confirmed team sheet, so that the quota of substitutes is not reduced. During the match, five (5) players can still be substituted. The replaced player(s) must be removed from the team sheet and not be available for selection for this fixture.
- c) Any amendments to the team sheet in accordance with points a) and b) above must be communicated to the opposing team manager by one of the Match Officials as soon as possible prior to the commencement of the match.

## 8 Players Must Wear Registered Colours

- a) The colours of the club shall be taken as the colour of the shirt, shorts and socks. A goalkeeper must wear a shirt of different colour and said shirt must be of a colour distinctive from that of their opponents.
- b) The players in each competing team must wear the registered colours of the club for which they are playing, except when opposing teams have similar colours in which case the home team shall change. Failure to comply will result in offending clubs being fined £50.
- c) In a Semi-Final or Final tie, or any other tie played on neutral ground, where opposing teams have similar colours both teams shall change unless it is mutually agreed that only one team need to do so.

- d) Referees shall have power to instruct a Club to change any part of their playing kit if they consider the colour not quite distinctive from that of their opponents, and the Referee shall have power to deal with any club or player refusing to comply with this instruction.

## 9 The Duration of the Match

- a) The duration of each match shall be 90 minutes. The match must be started at the time appointed by the Committee, but no protest will be upheld of late starting unless the Committee is satisfied that the result of the match was affected by such delay.
- b) The referee shall have power to allow additional time for stoppages.
- c) If a match has been stopped by the referee, before the completion of the time specified, for any reason stated in Law 5 of the Laws of the Game, the Committee shall have power to deal with the matter as they may determine.

## 10 Kicks from the Penalty Mark

In the event of any match resulting in a draw, extra time of ten minutes each way shall be played, and should the score be equal at the end of this period of extra time, the match shall be decided by the taking of kicks from the penalty mark in accordance with the conditions approved by the International FA Board.

## 11 Competition Format

The Committee shall determine the competition format.

## 12 Entry Levels

There shall be two entry levels in the competition:

- (i) Clubs playing in the NIWFA – Entry level.
- (ii) Clubs playing in the NIFL Women's Premiership – Round 2.

## 13 Bye may be given

The Committee may draw subsequent rounds before the winners of the previous round have been declared and the winners according to such draw shall compete against each other as in the previous round. The Committee shall have power to exempt any number of Clubs from any number of rounds and byes may be given so that the required number of additional clubs qualify to play in Round 2 where the NIFL Women's Premiership Clubs enter the competition.

## 14 Draw after bye – Competition Draw

In the event of a club getting a bye in any of the competition draws, the Committee at the subsequent draw shall first draw a Club to play against it from the lot. The two shall again be put in the ballot box and drawn again. The Club drawn first shall have the choice of ground.

## 15 Method of Drawing

- a) The Club that is first drawn in the ballot shall play at their registered home venue.
- b) In the event of a match being transferred to an alternative ground it shall be the responsibility of the team drawn at home to notify in writing, by email, both their opponents and the Irish Football Association not later than five days prior to the date of the match giving clear directions to the location of the ground. Failure to notify the Irish Football Association and opponents may result in the team being dismissed from the Competition.
- c) The first drawn club may forfeit home advantage with the agreement of their opponents and in such circumstances email must be sent to [competitions@irishfa.com](mailto:competitions@irishfa.com) by both clubs at least five days before the date of the match.
- d) Should a club, having a registered home ground which for whatever reason is unavailable (excluding inclement weather conditions) be drawn at home, they must travel to the ground of their opponents unless they receive agreement from their opponents and the Committee to play the match on an alternative date/time. Any match expenses incurred in staging a game in any round prior to the semi-finals and final will be the responsibility of the club that was first drawn in the ballot.

## 16 Playing Surfaces

Matches may be played on grass or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation (3G) artificial turf pitches.

## 17 Venues for the Semi-Finals and Finals

The venue for the Semi-Finals and Final ties shall be decided by the Committee and shall be neutral unless otherwise determined by the Committee, who may permit the match or matches to be played at the registered home venue of either of the participating teams. The final tie shall be played at the Clearer Twist National Stadium at Windsor Park unless otherwise determined by the Committee.

## 18 Clubs Failing to Play

Any club refusing or failing to play against the club against which it has been drawn on the date fixed by the Committee and without sufficient reasons for so-doing, shall be adjudged to have

lost the match and will be otherwise dealt with as the Committee may determine. Also, any club leaving the ground before the expiration of the game must be adjudged to have lost the match and shall be liable to be dealt with by the Committee.

## 19 Inclement Weather/When Postponed Games must be Played

- a) In the event of a match not taking place on the date arranged owing to the ground being declared unplayable by the referee or in the case of public grounds by the Local Authorities, up to and including the Preliminary Round and Rounds 1, 2, and 3, the teams shall forthwith arrange to play the following Friday. Matches postponed due to inclement weather from the Quarter-Finals stage, will be rescheduled at the discretion of the Committee.
- b) In the event of the match not taking place on the second Friday due to circumstances as above, the clubs will arrange to play the following Friday on the ground of the "Away team" and if not played on this day due to weather conditions arrangements must be made to play at the same location on the following Friday.
- c) In the event of the match not taking place on the second attempt at the ground of the original "Away team" the tie will revert from the following Friday to alternate weeks at the "Home" and "Away" grounds.

## 20 Match Officials

- a) In all matches the Association shall appoint the Referee, who will have the power to dispense with the services of the Assistant Referees of the clubs if they find them giving decisions at variance with the facts.
- b) The Association shall appoint Assistant Referees and 4th Officials to the Semi-Finals and Final ties.
- c) Where there is no appointed referee or where the appointed referee does not appear, the game may be refereed by a club referee (that is a qualified referee who is 6a member of a club) who is registered and who has paid their subscription to the Association.
- d) In the event that both teams have a qualified club referee, there shall be a coin toss and the winner shall referee the game. The qualified club referee shall be responsible for completing the match report on the Association's Comet Football Management System.
- e) Should there be no Association appointed Referee or qualified club referee available, the fixture will be recorded as postponed.
- f) In all matches prior to the semi-finals and final it will be the responsibility of the home team to pay match officials fees and expenses on the day of the match.
- g) In the Semi-Final and Final ties, the Association shall pay the fees and expenses of the Referees, Assistant Referees, and 4th Officials.

- h) Clubs may request, at their own expense, the appointment of Assistant Referees; the requesting club or clubs shall be responsible for all costs of the Assistant Referees.
- i) Requests for Assistant Referees must be agreed by both clubs and be submitted to [competitions@irishfa.com](mailto:competitions@irishfa.com) no later than 72 hours after the draw has been communicated to the clubs. Requests must be made in writing (by email) by the requesting club or clubs and must confirm the club or clubs responsible for the costs of the Assistant Referees.
- j) The competing clubs shall appoint the Assistant Referees to matches unless Rule 20h applies.

## 21 Protests

- a) Protests, along with a fee of £50, must be submitted and paid via MyComet within 3 days after the cause of the protest. The fee will be forfeited in all cases where the protest has not been sustained.
- b) Once a protest has been received the Irish FA will forward a copy of the protest to the club protested against.
- c) Protests against ineligible players must give the names of players protested against, and cause of protest.
- d) The deposit will not be returned by the Association unless the protest is upheld or withdrawn.

## 22 Notice of Scratching

- a) Any club intending to withdraw (scratch) from the Competition must give notice to [competitions@irishfa.com](mailto:competitions@irishfa.com) and to the Secretary of the opposing club. Such notice must be received at least 4 days before the date of the match. Any club failing to conform to this rule shall be fined a minimum sum of £50 by the Committee.
- b) The Committee may also compel the offending club to pay any expenses incurred by the opposing club provided they detail receipt of these expenses to [competitions@irishfa.com](mailto:competitions@irishfa.com).
- c) The Committee has the power to sanction the offending club with any other action they consider appropriate.

## 23 Agreement for Cup

It shall be the responsibility of the winning club to return the cup to the Association on or before 1<sup>st</sup> day of August or earlier if requested by the Association. The winning club shall return the cup in good or like condition and shall be liable for any costs in the event that the cup is destroyed by fire, or lost, or damaged by any other accident whilst in possession of the cup.

## 24 Medals/Mementoes

The Association shall present 25 medals to playing staff and officials of both Clubs competing in the Final tie. For the avoidance of any doubt this shall include the 18 players, 6 backroom staff, and the secretary of each club.

## 25 Division of Semi-Final Receipts

In the Semi-Final ties, the receipts (after all expenses are paid) shall be divided as follows: 10% to the Association and the balance divided equally amongst the competing clubs.

## 26 Division of Final Receipts

In the final, 10% of the net gate receipts will be retained by the Association and the remaining 90% will be divided equally between the 2 finalists, with the IFA bearing the cost of all match expenses.

## 27 Powers of the Committee

- a) Questions of eligibility or qualification of competitors, or of application of these rules or the laws of the game, shall be referred to the Committee for consideration and determination.
- b) The Committee shall have power to withhold the cup and medals or mementos.
- c) The Committee shall also have the power to deal with any other matter not provided for in these rules.



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