



IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

CLEARER WATER IRISH CUP COMPETITION RULES SEASON 2026-27

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1 – Annual Competition

- a) The Cup shall be called the 'Irish Football Association Challenge Cup' and shall be governed by the Challenge Cup Committee, hereinafter known as the Committee.
- b) The Competition for the Cup shall be annual and open to Clubs in full membership of the NIFL Premiership/NIFL Championship (hereinafter Senior Clubs), together with Clubs in full membership of The Northern Amateur Football League (NAFL) National Conference League. The Committee may permit other clubs to compete. Such other clubs must also compete in the Intermediate Cup Competition during the current season. Any club withdrawing from the Intermediate Cup and without sufficient reason for so doing shall be debarred from competing in the Challenge Cup for the ensuing three seasons.

2 – Date of Application

Application for permission to compete in the competition shall be made online via Comet FMS, not later than 30 June 2026 and shall be accompanied by an entry fee of £50.00. It shall be the sole responsibility of clubs to enter in order to participate in the competition. The Competition shall be conducted under the Articles of Association, the Laws of the Game, and these Rules. The Committee may at its discretion accept sponsorship for the Competition or any part thereof.

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 power to call upon such player and/or Club to which he belongs, or for which he played, to prove that he is qualified according to the Rules. Any Club found guilty of fielding an ineligible player in any round of the competition and prior to the next round being played, up to and including the semi-final tie may be fined up to a maximum sum of £250.00. Furthermore, the said club will be dismissed from the competition and the club losing the game in such circumstances shall replace the dismissed club and progress to the next round.

4 – Eligible Players

- a) The competing teams should consist of eleven players each. While the players in each team may be changed, no individual shall play for more than one Club in the Challenge Cup in the same season.
- b) A player shall be construed as taking part in the game for which he was nominated only if he has actually played in the game. For the avoidance of doubt, an unused substitute shall not be construed as having played in the game.
- c) To be eligible to participate in the 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 any doubt to be eligible to play in this competition a player must also be eligible to participate for his 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

15 June 2026 – 1 September 2026

Second Registration Period

1 January 2027 – 1 February 2027

- f) No player who is registered by his club after 1 February 2027 shall be eligible to participate in that same season.

5 – Completion of Team Lineup

- a) For each match, each Club shall complete their team lineup by including the names of players, team officials (a maximum of 6 officials) and their functions (including the name of the nominated substitutes) and confirm the lineup via Comet FMS 45 minutes prior to kick-off for matches from qualifying rounds 1 to round 5 and 75 minutes prior to kick-off from round 6 to the final tie.
- b) Players' names must correspond with the numbers assigned on the official team lineup. The Club Comet user shall be considered to verify the accuracy of the information provided on the team lineup via Comet FMS.
- c) Any club failing to provide such confirmation by the stipulated deadlines will be fined in the sum of £25 for each offence. Fines for Late Team Lineups will be administered via COMET FMS.

6 – Substitute Players

- 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 is stopped and the referee has given permission. Substitute players shall be nominated prior to the commencement of the tie.
- b) Clubs may nominate a maximum of seven substitute players, from which five substitutions shall be permitted.

- c) Exceptionally, a sixth substitute may take part exclusively during extra time.
- d) Substitutions may only be made on at most three occasions during the game. One additional substitution window will be granted to each club should a match proceed to extra time.
- e) Substitutions made during half-time, and 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 Lineup

After the team lineups 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 lineup 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 lineup. The substitute(s) in question can then be replaced by a player(s) not named on the initial team lineup, 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 lineup and not be available for selection for this fixture.
- b) If any of the seven (7) substitutes named on the team lineup are not able to be fielded due to unexpected physical incapacity, they can be replaced by any player not named on the confirmed team lineup, 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 lineup and not be available for selection for this fixture.
- c) Any amendments to the team lineup 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 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 visiting club shall change.
- b) In a semi-final or final tie, or any other tie played on neutral ground, where opposing teams have similar colours both teams will change unless they are agreed that only one need to do so.
- c) Referees shall have power to instruct a Club to change any part of their playing kit if he considers the colour not quite distinctive from that of his opponents, and the Referee shall have power to deal with any player refusing to comply with this instruction.

9 – The duration of a 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 for 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 fifteen 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

- a) The Committee shall determine the competition format.
- b) In order to determine the additional clubs to join the Senior Clubs in Round 6 of the Competition, the Committee may play a qualifying round or rounds of ties (qualifying phase). In the event of the Committee deciding to play a qualifying round or rounds, it shall then determine which clubs will be invited to participate. Ties shall be played on the ground of the first drawn club (subject to the conditions detailed in rule 16). A player who plays for a club in a qualifying round(s) cannot play for another in the competition during the same season.

12 – Entry Levels

There shall be three entry levels in the competition.

- (i) Clubs in membership of regional intermediate leagues shall enter the competition at the first entry level.
- (ii) Clubs in full membership of The NAFL National Conference League shall enter the competition at the second entry level – Round 2.
- (iii) Clubs in full membership of the NIFL Premiership/NIFL Championship shall enter the competition at the third entry level – Round 6.

13 – Clubs shall be drawn in lots

The lots shall be drawn and Competition matches played as the Committee may determine, and immediately after each draw the Association will publish the result of the draw and the date on which the ties are to be played.

14 – Byes may be given

- a) The Committee may draw subsequent round or rounds before the winners of the previous rounds have been declared, and the winners according to such draw shall compete against each as in the previous round.
- b) 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 is obtained to play in Round 6 where the Senior Clubs enter the Competition.

15 – Draw after Bye

In the event of a club getting a bye in any of the drawings, the Committee at the subsequent drawing, shall first draw a Club to play against it from the lot, the two shall again be put in the ballot-box and again drawn, and the club first out of the box shall have choice of ground (subject to the conditions detailed in rule 16): but the Committee may so arrange that four clubs compete in the semi-finals.

16 – Method of Drawing

- a) In principle the club that is first drawn in the ballot shall play at their registered home venue. However, should an intermediate club that enters the competition at the first entry level be drawn against a senior club the tie will be played at the registered home venue of the senior club. As an exception to this rule, NAFL National Conference League clubs will be permitted to host senior clubs at their registered home venue.
- b) The first drawn club may forfeit home advantage with the agreement of their opponents and in such circumstances written confirmation of same must be notified to competitions@irishfa.com by both clubs not later than 5 days following the date of the relevant draw.
- c) Each club entering the competition should play their home games on their registered home ground (unless otherwise directed in exceptional circumstances by the Committee, Health and Safety authorities or the PSNI). Any match expenses incurred in staging a game at a neutral venue, in any round prior to the semi-finals and final, will be the responsibility of the club that was first drawn in the ballot.
- d) Should a club having a registered home ground which, for whatever reason be unavailable (excluding

inclement weather conditions) be drawn at home, they must travel to the ground of their opponents. 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.

- e) The Committee reserves the right to reschedule any fixture that has been chosen for live broadcast by an approved broadcast partner.

17 – Private Ground

- a) A private ground shall be taken to be a ground over which the Club has sole control during the match, properly enclosed so as to prevent spectators entering the ground except by admission gates, and in which the dressing rooms and other appurtenances shall be up to standard required by the Committee. A fee must be charged for all Cup Tie matches and the minimum admission prices shall be fixed annually by the Committee.
- b) Clubs may only participate if their facilities have been approved for participation in regional Intermediate leagues, NAFL National Conference League, NIFL Championship or NIFL Premiership Ground Criteria.

18 – Venues for Semi Finals and Finals

- a) In the semi-finals the grounds shall be chosen by the Committee and shall be neutral unless otherwise determined by the Committee who may, upon request, permit the match or matches to be played at the registered home venue of either of the participating teams.
- b) The final tie shall be played at the Clearer Twist National Stadium at Windsor Park unless otherwise determined by the Committee. Should any club participate in the final tie at their registered ground no ground rent will be payable.

19 – Club Information

Each club must ensure that the following details are submitted and kept up to date on the Comet FMS:

- i. Name/Situation of Ground
- ii. Colours of Club shirt, shorts and socks
- iii. The name and contact details of Secretary

20 – Clubs failing to play

- a) 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.

- b) The Association reserves the right to implement a protocol in the event of exceptional circumstances.

21 – When postponed games must be played

- a) In the event of a tie prior to the round where the Senior Clubs enter being postponed the clubs must forthwith arrange to meet on the following Saturday.
- b) In the event of a tie from where the Senior Clubs enter to the Quarter Finals being postponed the clubs must arrange to meet on a date to be determined by the Committee. In the case of such a postponed tie should only one of the clubs concerned have floodlights available at its registered home venue the rearranged tie shall be played at the venue with floodlights.
- c) In the event of a tie not taking place at the venue of the home club at the second attempt due to inclement weather, the club first drawn away shall play the tie at its registered home venue. From the stage at which Senior Clubs enter the competition through to the Quarter Finals, a tie shall only be moved where the club meets the criteria set out in Rule 21(b).
- d) In the event of a tie not taking place following the third attempt, the venue and date on which the tie shall be replayed shall be determined by the Committee.
- e) In the case of protested ties the Committee shall decide the dates and venues. Should either club refuse to compete, the club shall be removed from the competition, and otherwise dealt with as the Committee may determine.

22 – Match Officials

- a) In all matches the match officials shall be appointed by the IFA administration.
 - i. In matches up to and including Round 5 only a Referee shall be appointed.
 - ii. In matches from Round 6 onwards a Referee, two Assistant Referees and a 4th Official shall be appointed.
 - iii. A Reserve Assistant Referee will also be appointed to final tie.
- b) On points of fact connected with the play over which the Assistant Referees have control, their decision should be given by flags. The Referee must use a whistle. In the question of interpretation of these rules or the laws of the game, an appeal may be made to the Committee, but the Referee's decision must be acted on in the field.
- c) In Rounds 1 to 5 it will be the responsibility of the home team to pay the match officials fees and expenses on the day of the match.

- d) In Rounds 6, 7, and the Quarter Finals the costs of referees will be split equally between the two competing clubs. The Association will pay the referees directly and will deduct such referee costs from the prize money payment owing to clubs when they are dismissed from the competition.
- e) In the semi-final and final matches, the Association will be responsible for making payment to the match officials.

23 – Football Video Support (FVS)

- a) Football Video Support (FVS) may be used in Irish Cup matches from the Quarter-Final stage onwards, subject to the approval of the Committee and the availability of appropriate infrastructure and trained personnel at the match venue.
- b) Where FVS is in operation, all participating clubs, match officials, and competition personnel shall comply with the FIFA-approved FVS protocol and any additional procedures issued by the Committee.
- c) The implementation of FVS for any match shall be at the sole discretion of the Committee, which reserves the right not to use FVS where operational, technical, safety, or logistical requirements cannot be met.
- d) The Committee shall notify participating clubs in advance of each match as to whether FVS will be in operation.

24 – Protests

- a) Protests, along with a fee of £100, must be submitted and paid via MyComet within 2 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 after received by the Association unless the protest is upheld or withdrawn.

25 – Protest objection to ground

- a) In the event of one of the competing clubs protesting that the ground of its opponent is not private, or fit and proper to be played upon, a committee of inspection shall be appointed by the Committee to investigate and decide the question. The protest must be lodged with the Challenge Cup Committee by Special Delivery letter five days previous to the date fixed for the match together with an inspection fee of £100.

- b) In the event of a protest not being sustained the fee will be forfeited, but should the protest be sustained, the club protested against shall be required to refund the same through the Association previous to the tie being played. No protest will be entertained after a match as to the privacy of a ground, provided there has been sufficient time to enable clubs to take advantage of this Rule.

26 – Objections to ground etc.

Goal-nets must be used in all cup ties. Any objection to ground, goal-posts, goal-nets or ball must be lodged in writing by a responsible club official on the day with the Referee before the game, and the Referee shall have power to have such objections made right before the game starts.

27 – Referee to inspect Ground

- a) In the case of unfavourable weather conditions or concerns regarding the playing surface, the Home Club must request the Association for an early inspection not later than four hours before kick-off.
- b) The Match Referee or an alternative Referee appointed by the Association shall inspect the ground at least three hours or more previous to the advertised time of kick-off and shall decide as to the fitness of the ground not later than three hours prior to the pre-arranged time of kick-off, their decision being final.
- c) No game shall be postponed without an inspection by a referee appointed by the Association, who shall take due cognisance of local advice and the travelling supporters.
- d) Notwithstanding the above, in the event of extreme weather conditions the Association reserves the right to declare any match or matches postponed without a formal pitch inspection.
- e) In the event of a Referee not arriving at the ground by the time of kick off the match shall be postponed and the clubs must agree to re-arrange the match in accordance with rule 21.

28 – Agreement for Cup

It shall be the responsibility of the winning club to return the cup to the Association on or before the 1st day of March or earlier if so 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 the possession of the club.

29 – Medals

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.

30 – Admission to Matches

The Committee will determine the admission policy for the competition on an annual basis.

31 – Division of Receipts up to Semi Final

- a) In all ties previous to Semi-Finals, the gate receipts after payment of the costs pertaining to referees, professional security company, turnstiles, ambulance/first aid cover, ticketing or live streaming (if approved by the Committee) shall be equally divided between the two competing Clubs. (The home club shall ensure that copies of the receipts for such costs are furnished to the away team upon request).
- b) Payment shall be made to the away team within 28 days following the date on which the match was played.
- c) Non-payment by the deadlines for either the home or away teams shall result in an automatic increase of 10% of the monies due for up to 7 days late payment and 20% between 7 to 14 days late payment. All other cases shall be referred to the Committee who will deal with the matter as they consider appropriate.
- d) Season tickets shall not be valid for any tie played in this Competition.

32 – Division of Semi Final and Final Gate Receipts

- a) In the **semi-final ties** the net receipts (including stands) shall be divided as follows: 10% to the Association and the balance divided equally amongst the competing clubs.
- b) In the **Final Tie**, the receipts after all expenses are paid, shall be divided as follows: The Association to take 20% and the remaining balance to be equally divided between the competing clubs.
- c) All tickets for the final tie shall be sold via the Association's online ticketing platform.
- d) In principle all tickets for semi-final ties will be sold via the Association's online ticketing platform. However, in the event that the clubs are required to sell tickets then all money generated from the sale of tickets in respect of semi-final and final ties must be submitted by the respective clubs to the Association within 7 days following the date of the match. In respect of such ticket sales any balance of unsold tickets must be returned to the Association by a pre-determined date, which in all cases will be a date prior to the match, or the club shall be financially liable for the balance.
- e) Non-payment by this deadline shall result in an automatic increase of 10% of the monies due for up to seven (7) days late payment and 20% between seven (7) to fourteen (14) days late payment. All other cases shall be referred to the committee who will deal with the matter as they consider appropriate.

33 – Powers of 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 mementoes.
- c) The Committee shall also have the power to deal with any other matter not provided for in these rules.

34 – Committee may alter Rules

The Committee shall, except as to the returns by Clubs, have power to alter these Rules, but in no case shall they do so until after the Final Tie has been played in any year.



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