

IRISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

APPEALS COMMITTEE

In the matter of an appeal by **DAMIEN GRIMLEY** ('the Appellant') against a decision made by the **REFEREES' COMMITTEE** ('the Respondent')

Appeal Board:

Carley Chapman

David Lennox

Mervyn Wheatley

Attendees:

1. The Appellant attended along with Edward Adair, the Chairman of the North East Ulster Referees Association and the Respondent was represented by Andrew Davey, Head of Referring, David Redfern (Referees' Committee Member) and Tommy Fairfield (Referees' Committee Member).
2. The Appeal Board thanks the parties for their attendance and for their written and oral submissions.

Background:

3. This is an Appeal against a decision communicated by the Respondent to the Appellant on 23 July 2026. The decision was that from the commencement of the 2026/27 season, individuals appointed to the Observer Panel will no longer be permitted to act as an active referee during the same season.
4. The Communication introduces a new restriction requiring officials appointed to the Observer Panel to choose between serving as an observer or continuing as an active referee.

Points raised on appeal:

5. The Appellant made the following key points:
 - a. This restriction has not previously formed part of the regulations or conditions governing registered match officials. It amounts to a regulatory change which should only be introduced through the formal governance procedures established by the IFA.
 - b. Meaningful consultation should have taken place before implementing a restriction affecting the participation of qualified officials.
 - c. The decision was communicated shortly before the commencement of the season leaving affected officials with limited opportunity to understand, comment upon or influence a decision which has a direct impact upon their continued participation within football.
 - d. For many years, officials have been permitted to contribute to football by undertaking both refereeing and observing roles. This established practice has created a legitimate

expectation that, provided there is no actual conflict of interest, and all applicable standards are maintained, individuals may continue to contribute in both capacities.

- e. Where a decision changes the rights, obligations or eligibility of members, it should be implemented through the appropriate regulatory process rather than by administrative direction alone. No consultation or transparent decision-making process has taken place.
 - f. The Appellant does not believe that there is a conflict of interest in his role as both an observer and an active referee.
 - g. A more proportionate approach would be to permit Observer Panel members to continue officiating exclusively within youth football. Such an arrangement would ensure that an observer was not simultaneously officiating within the same competitions that they are responsible for observing, thereby maintaining the independence and integrity of the observation process while allowing experienced officials to continue contributing to the development of young players and referees.
6. The Respondent made the following key points:
- a. Regulation 22 of the IFA Football Regulations ('the Regulations') clearly states that '*the Referees' Committee shall be responsible for all matters pertaining to referees (other than the payment of fees and expenses to referees) including but not limited to recruitment, training, grading, dealing with complaints concerning the application of the Laws of the Game, instruction, appointment of international referees, other relevant appointments and assessment.*'
 - b. The Respondent has been advised that a number of youth leagues are currently oversubscribed, with some registered referees not receiving regular appointments. It therefore did not want an individual appointed as an observer, whose primary role is to coach and develop referees, to also occupy appointments that could otherwise provide opportunities for referees progressing through the pathway.
 - c. There is the potential for a perceived conflict of interest.
 - d. The Northern Ireland Referee Association (NIRA) has been represented at the Respondent's Committee meetings throughout the past season, during which preliminary discussions took place regarding this matter. NIRA therefore had an opportunity to raise any concerns or objections during those discussions and prior to the decision being implemented.
 - e. The primary role of an observer is the coaching, education and development of referees across Northern Ireland.
 - f. The decision was made following consideration of referee opportunities, the role and responsibilities of observers, potential conflicts of interest and the wider development of referees across Northern Ireland.

Decision:

7. The Appeal Board notes that the Appellant does not believe that there would be any conflict of interest in him acting as both an observer and an active referee, however, the Appeal Board

believes that it has to defer to the Respondent as to what might constitute a perceived conflict and sees no reason to conclude why it ought to question the Respondent's decision in that regard on this occasion.

8. The Appeal Board has carefully considered the arguments raised by both parties and is of the opinion that Regulation 22 of the Regulations permits the Respondent to decide that individuals appointed to an Observer Panel for a season will not be permitted to act as an active referee during that same season.
9. The Appeal Board is content that since a representative of NIRA was in attendance at the Respondent's Committee meetings throughout the past season when preliminary discussions took place, there was opportunity to raise any concerns prior to the implementation of the decision.
10. Therefore, pursuant to Article 14(6)(a) of the IFA's Articles of Association, the Appeal Board affirms the decision of the Respondent and dismisses the appeal.

Dated: 29 September 2026

Carley Chapman

Vice Chair

On behalf of the Appeal Board