



REIMAGINING

**Men's Community Rugby League:
The Structure & Season Plan
(2026)**

Foreword

The National Community Rugby League (NCRL) proposal represents a bold and necessary evolution for open age men's rugby league.

In recent years, our sport has faced mounting challenges:

- **Declining participation:** Open age male player numbers have steadily decreased, with many players choosing to play less frequently or leaving the game altogether.
- **Financial strain:** Clubs continue to feel the impact of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, with rising travel costs, facility hire, and volunteer burnout threatening sustainability.
- **Volunteer fatigue:** Administrators and coaches report feeling unsupported and overwhelmed, with inconsistent calendars and unclear progression pathways adding to the pressure.
- **Poor touchline behaviours:** A win-at-all-costs culture has contributed to negative environments, driving players and volunteers away from the game.
- **Fragmented structures:** The absence of a clear, unified pyramid has limited club ambition, growth, and investment, especially in regions outside the traditional heartlands.

This has led to people saying, 'the game is dying'. That is not the case. Covid years aside, we have seen year-on-year growth across our youth and junior offers, albeit the growth has slowed post-covid. In other parts of the game, such as women's and girls' inclusion sports (Wheelchair RL, PDRL, LDRL), we have seen significant growth. The outlier is men's open age.

Such challenges are not unique to rugby league. Other sports have faced similar challenges and modernised their community structures to improve sustainability, progression, and participant experience. We accept that changing structures alone will not provide the full solution. Other areas such as the transition from youth to open age and impact of talent pathways also need addressing. However, a reinvigorated competition framework provides a strong base. The NCRL is our opportunity to reset the foundations of open age rugby league and together build a future that works for players, clubs, and volunteers.

This proposal is grounded in extensive consultation, strategic reviews, and the lived experiences of those delivering the game week in, week out. It reflects the findings of the Open Age Review, the Whole Game Refresh, and annual end-of-season feedback.

It also draws inspiration from other sports that have successfully implemented tiered systems and promotion pathways to drive growth and retention.

The NCRL is not just a new competition; it reflects a new whole-game approach. It prioritises player development, club sustainability, and volunteer wellbeing. It introduces a clear pyramid structure, a revitalised calendar, and a fair, transparent route for progression, all underpinned by minimum standards and regional responsiveness. It is designed to elevate the community game, not burden it.

Some competitions have grown in terms of the numbers of teams competing through effectively 'promoting' teams from regional competitions without 'relegating' teams who may be more suited to regional activity. However, squad sizes have reduced. Many clubs travel without a full complement of players, including some NCL Premier Clubs. Often, there is an over-reliance on U18's or second team players which has impacted fixture completion and the enjoyment of players in other competitions. There has been some success, but often at the expense of others.



Through the NCRL, we aim to preserve the principles that have underpinned success while taking a more holistic approach to strengthening the sport as a whole.

We appreciate that some clubs may feel the changes have been brought in too quickly, and we understand this concern. However, it has been clear that we have needed to evolve for some time, and we have been working on what potential structures could look like for over a year. We are confident that we have the right plans in place. Whilst we have endeavoured to keep clubs up to date with the direction of travel, it is only possible to give clubs the full details once the season has concluded. There will be no significant delay to the timelines in terms of publishing fixtures, which will be confirmed in December.

This is our moment to reimagine open age rugby league to unify structure, calendar and progression, and to build a future where every club, regardless of geography or history, has a pathway to thrive.





Introduction

This document sets out the proposed structure and season calendar for the National Community Rugby League (NCRL), launching in 2026 for the men's open age competition at Tier 3 and below.

The NCRL introduces:

- A unified national pyramid with clear progression between tiers
- A new National Cup competition and regional cups
- A cross-conference national play-off structure (CCPOs) to determine promotion
- A rebalanced season calendar aligned with player lifestyles and club sustainability

The structure applies to all open age formats delivered nationally, regionally, and locally, including National Divisions, National Conferences and Regional Leagues. It provides a consistent framework for competition delivery, governance, and progression across the entire community game.

The proposal responds to long-standing structural challenges:

- Fragmented competition formats and inconsistent standards
- Volunteer strain and poor fixture completion rates
- Declining open age participation and poor touchline behaviours

It also reflects the strategic ambition to:

- Embed a more varied, development-focused playing calendar
- Reduce travel and financial burden on clubs
- Improve governance, visibility, and commercial viability across the community game
- Create a fair and transparent system for promotion and relegation subject to minimum standards

The NCRL pyramid will consist of:

- National Divisions and National Conferences (Tiers 3 and 4)
- Regional Leagues and Social Rugby (Tiers 5 and 6)

Promotion and relegation will be based on on-field performance and minimum standards, with regional responsiveness ensuring balanced competition sizes. The structure is designed to accommodate growth, with new conferences able to join and develop over time.

This document outlines the competition framework, play-off formats and cup competitions, calendar options, and operational principles that will guide the NCRL's implementation. It is intended to support clubs, volunteers and stakeholders in understanding the vision, mechanics and opportunities of this new era for open-age rugby league.

Development-Focused

The NCRL is intentionally designed to support development at every level for players, clubs and volunteers. It moves beyond survival-based competition and instead fosters growth, retention and long-term participation.

Key features include:

- **Varied match formats:** League, cup, and play-offs offer different competitive experiences to support skill development and motivation.
- **Progression pathways:** Transparent promotion and relegation systems reward ambition and encourage investment in coaching and governance.
- **Minimum standards:** Ensure safe, well-managed environments that support club growth and volunteer wellbeing.



- **Social and entry-level tiers:** Create space for new teams, returning players, and flexible formats, supporting lifelong participation.

Regional Responsiveness

Regional responsiveness ensures the NCRL structure adapts to local realities while maintaining national consistency. It allows competitions to reflect geography, travel demands and club capacity.

Key principles include:

- **Flexible league sizes:** National Conferences and Leagues can vary in team numbers to suit local conditions.
- **Responsive promotion/relegation:** Movement between tiers considers performance, readiness and regional balance.
- **Growth accommodation:** New conferences or leagues can be added as participation increases.

This approach ensures the NCRL remains inclusive, scalable and sensitive to the needs of diverse regions.



NCRL Pyramid Structure (2026 Onward)

The NCRL introduces a six-tier framework for men's open age rugby league. This structure provides clarity, progression and flexibility across the community game.

Tier	Description
Tier 1	Betfred Men's Super League – Professional competition operated by the RFL (not linked to NCRL promotion/relegation)
Tier 2	Championship & League 1 – Professional competition (not linked to NCRL promotion/relegation)
Tier 3	National League - Premier Division & Division 1 – Two national divisions of 12 teams each
Tier 4	National Conferences – e.g. Yorkshire, North West, Cumbria, Southern
Tier 5	Regional Leagues – Open age competitions delivered in partnership between the RFL and regional groups. Formats vary by geography and may include traditional leagues, short-form competitions or hybrid models
Tier 6	Social & Developmental Rugby – Entry-level participation and new club formation

Key Notes

- Promotion and relegation will operate between Tier 3 and Tier 5, ensuring a clear and inclusive progression pathway for all open age clubs. Movement is based on performance and minimum standards, with regional balancing applied where needed.
- Tiers 1 and 2 remain part of the professional game and are not currently integrated into the NCRL pyramid. The NCRL governs all sanctioned open-age competitions from Tier 3 and below.
- Tier 5 (Regional Leagues) provides flexible, development-focused competition formats for clubs. These leagues are delivered collaboratively by the RFL and regional groups, offering reduced travel, varied structures and accessible entry points for new or returning teams. They support club sustainability and progression into Tier 4 for teams that meet minimum standards and demonstrate competitive readiness.
- Tier 6 (Social Rugby) offers informal formats ideal for new teams or returning players, and flexible participation. It supports lifelong involvement and provides a low-barrier entry point into the structured game.

The structure is scalable, allowing new conferences and regions to join over time. This ensures the NCRL can grow with the game, adapting to participation trends and regional needs.



Governance

To ensure consistency, transparency and operational integrity across the NCRL, the Tier 3 and Tier 4 competitions will be overseen by the RFL and a dedicated volunteer National and Conference League Management Group, supported by a designated Competition Officer and/or Manager.

Governance Structure

- The RFL retains ultimate responsibility for governance, compliance and strategic alignment across the NCRL framework.
- The National and Conference League Management Group provides operational oversight, discipline, membership decisions and strategic input.
- The Competition Officer/Manager leads the day-to-day running of the competition, including fixture coordination, club support, communications and calendar delivery.

Management Group members play active roles in shaping competition delivery, supporting clubs and upholding standards. Their responsibilities may include:

- Reviewing club applications and entry criteria
- Supporting fixture management and calendar planning
- Overseeing discipline and misconduct cases
- Advising on rule changes and competition development
- Representing club interests and regional perspectives

Tier 5 – Regional Leagues: Regional Leagues will continue to be delivered by regional groups with RFL oversight. While governance expectations are proportionate to the level of competition, these leagues remain part of the NCRL framework and will be supported through aligned calendar planning, club onboarding and development-focused standards.

Terms of Reference

Each Competition will operate under formal Terms of Reference, aligned with RFL frameworks. These will define:

- The composition and responsibilities of the Management Group
- Appointment, term limits and decision-making procedures
- Discipline, appeals and conflict of interest protocols
- Club membership, re-election and expulsion processes
- Meeting frequency and club engagement mechanisms

The Terms of Reference will be reviewed periodically to ensure they remain fit for purpose and responsive to the needs of the competition.

Competition Rules and Minimum Standards

In addition to the Terms of Reference, each competition will be governed by a set of Competition Rules, which will:

- Define the minimum standards for participation including facilities, governance, administration and operational delivery
- Outline expectations for fixture fulfilment, conduct and compliance
- Support fair and transparent promotion and relegation
- Ensure alignment with the NCRL's strategic goals and operational principles

League Finances

As part of the NCRL transition, leagues that currently hold funds will have two options:

- Continue managing funds locally, in line with their constitution
- Transfer funds into a ring-fenced RFL-administered account, similar to existing RFL-run community competitions

Both options support transparency and allow leagues to retain control over how funds are used. Leagues will confirm their preferred approach during onboarding.

Fixture Fulfilment Clause

As part of the minimum standards, clubs will be required to fulfil all scheduled fixtures. 100% fixture completion rate is a non-negotiable for teams in Tier 3 National Leagues and Tier 4 Conferences. This reflects the expectations of participating clubs and the need to maintain integrity and fairness across the NCRL calendar.

- Fixture cancellation will not be permitted except in exceptional circumstances, such as weather, safety concerns or RFL-approved reasons
- Unauthorised cancellations will result in significant sanctions, which may include:
 - Financial penalties
 - Points deductions
 - Relegation or removal from the competition

All clubs must meet the published entry criteria and agree to the Competition Rules as a condition of membership. These standards will be reviewed annually and communicated clearly to clubs during onboarding and consultation periods.



Season Calendar and Parameters

The NCRL season will run from March to late October, spanning 35 weeks and approximately 8 months. This window must accommodate league fixtures, cup competitions, play-offs and backlog weekends. Consistency from year to year is important. Clubs will know that the season will start every year at the beginning of March, with teams playing through until October.

Comparable sports such as Rugby Union and Football run approximately nine-month seasons within their respective community games.

Protected Weekends

- Challenge Cup Final
- Men's Grand Final
- Easter, May (x2), August Bank Holidays → *At least 6 weekends unavailable*

While four weekends are typically unavailable due to Bank Holidays (Easter, two in May, and August), the May Bank Holidays may be used for Cup fixtures where appropriate to maintain competition flow and calendar balance.

Available Weeks

- Approx. 29 weeks for league, cup and play-offs

Calendar Principles

- Strong start with regular fixtures
- Early competitive variety via cup rounds
- Summer flexibility for player/volunteer availability
- High-quality finish with marquee finals



This section outlines the key league format structures considered for the NCRL's Tier 3 and Tier 4 competitions. Each option reflects a different balance of competitive load, calendar rhythm and regional integration. We have considered the interaction and interdependencies between a number of Tier 3 Leagues and Tier 4 National Conferences. We have evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of each model to support transparent decision-making and confirm the preferred structure for the 2026 season.

Two primary structures were considered for Tier 3 national divisions, i.e. Divisions of 10 or 12. We also factored in the impact of the National Cup.

- **League:** 22 rounds
- **Cup:** Optional (between 2 and 6 games)
- **Play-Offs:** 3 weeks
- **Total Load:** 24–31 weeks
- **Backlog Weekends:** Limited (if opt into cup)
- **Bank Holidays:** Some may be needed for fixtures

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- Familiar structure for clubs already operating in 12-team leagues
- High number of fixtures ensures continuity and rhythm
- Integrated National Cup adds variety and national engagement
- Strong competitive narrative across the season
- Cup rounds concentrated during the summer period, providing greater flexibility for the majority of teams, where we know fixture completion is historically lower
- We understand that the summer period is a time when player availability is stressed the most; as such, we've put the later knock-out stages of the cup during this period. Which means for the majority of teams, they have some breaks during this time. These breaks will also be used as backlog weekends. We will also look to alternate fixtures with the regional leagues, allowing clubs to put 1 team out per weekend unless you reach the latter stages of the cup

- Full fixture calendar with limited flexibility for rescheduling
- Bank holidays may be required for competitive play
- Fewer backlog weekends for weather or availability issues
- Clubs not entering the cup may feel disconnected from the national storyline



The below illustrates what calendar a team would follow if they chose not to enter the National Cup.

- **League:** 22 rounds
- **Play-Offs:** 3 weeks
- **Total Load:** 22–25 weeks
- **Backlog Weekends:** Numerous
- **Bank Holidays:** No fixtures scheduled

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- Simplified calendar with fewer fixture demands
- Familiar format for clubs and volunteers
- Easier to manage player availability and volunteer workload

- No cup competition or knockout excitement
- Missed opportunity for cross-tier competition
- Reduced exposure and variety for clubs
- Potential loss of national narrative and marquee moments

- **League:** 18 rounds
- **Cup:** Integrated (up to 5 rounds)
- **Play-Offs:** 3 weeks
- **Total Load:** 20–26 weeks
- **Backlog Weekends:** 2–4 available

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- More manageable fixture schedule across the season
- Adequate rest periods and backlog weekends



- Supports player wellbeing and volunteer sustainability
- Enables full integration of National Cup and CCPOs

Cons:

- Short-term disruption as teams adjust to new format
- Some clubs may feel displaced or perceive “relegation”
- Risk of too many free weekends affecting momentum
- Requires careful communication to highlight long-term benefits

Having considered the options fully, the preferred option in 2026 is for Tier 3 to consist of 12 teams in each division in 2026.

	Structure	Fixtures	National Cup	Play-Off	Season load	Season load without cup	Start Date	Earliest Finishing Date	Latest Finishing Date
Option 1 National Premier & Division 1	12 teams	22	Max 6 Min 2	Max 3 Min 1	Max 31 min 24	Max 25 Min 22	7 th March	26 th Sept	31 st Oct
Conference(s)	8 to 10*	14 or 18	Max 6 Min 2	Max 6 Min 3	Max 30(26) Min 23 (19)	Max 24 (20) Min 21 (17)	7 th March if 10 team, 11 th April if 8 team	12 th Sept	17 th Oct League or 31 st Oct if in Cup Final



Divisional Structure

Having considered the optimum number of teams in each Division within Tier 3, the next stage is to consider the make-up of the National Conferences in Tier 4. To support the implementation of the NCRL pyramid, numerous options were considered for Tier 3 and Tier 4. These options reflect different balances of national reach, regional representation, travel demands and competitive integrity. Each format is designed to accommodate existing clubs while enabling future growth and sustainability.

We have considered a whole range of options from 1-3 National Divisions and 3-8 National Conferences. We have narrowed those options down to what we consider to be the strongest, and following input from key stakeholders.

Option 1 – 2 National Leagues & 5 National Conferences

Conference Format – 2 x Yorkshire, 1 x North West inc. Barrow, 1 x Cumbria, 1 x Southern

Pros

- Broad national coverage while maintaining manageable travel distances.
- Accommodates all existing NCL teams within the new structure.
- Two Yorkshire conferences reflect participation density and club strength.
- Reduces travel costs and encourages player retention.
- Balanced mix of regional and national competition opportunities.

Cons

- Requires careful balancing between Yorkshire conferences to avoid disparity.
- Administrative complexity in managing five conferences.
- Risk of uneven promotion/relegation distribution across regions.

Option 2 – 2 National Leagues & 4 National Conferences

Conference Format – 1 x Yorkshire, 1 x North West inc. Barrow, 1 x Cumbria, 1 x Southern

Pros

- Simplified, easy-to-manage structure with even geographic spread.
- Stronger competition depth and less disparity within each national conference.
- Straightforward promotion/relegation framework between tiers.

Cons

- Reduces representation in large participation areas (Yorkshire, North West).
- Some teams may feel displaced as there are limited spaces to compete at national conference level.
- Some existing clubs, particularly in Yorkshire may find it harder to access the national conference level.

Option 3 – 2 National Leagues & 6 National Conferences

Conference Format – 2 x Yorkshire, 2 x North West inc. Barrow, 1 x Cumbria, 1 x Southern

Pros

- Maximises local competition, reducing travel and cost for most clubs.
- Accommodates all existing NCL teams within the new structure.
- Increases local engagement and retention through shorter travel times.

Cons

- Risk of regional imbalance if team standards vary widely.
- Would initially include several teams who have confirmed they do not see themselves as conference standard.
- More complex promotion/relegation logistics between similar regions.
- Could potentially weaken regional leagues underneath.



Option 4 - 3 National Leagues & 3 National Conferences

Conference Format – 1 x Yorkshire, 1 x North West & Cumbria, 1 x Southern

Pros

- Allows all teams that desire a national offer to initially play at that level.
- Clear national pathway and offers familiarity to the majority of clubs.

Cons

- Greater travel distances as fewer teams will benefit from regionalisation.
- Would include teams at the conference level who have not expressed a desire to be there.
- Regional teams elevated into National Leagues.
- No significant difference between this and the current structure, so it doesn't feel aligned to the reasons why change is needed.

Regional Caveat: Cumbria

While the structural options aim to balance national and regional priorities, it is recognised that Cumbria represents a particular challenge. The current configuration of the Cumbria Conference is subject to ongoing discussion. Further consultation is being undertaken to explore whether Cumbria should remain a standalone conference, be merged with neighbouring regions, or should adopt a revised format that better supports club sustainability and competitive integrity.

See Appendix 1 for the full breakdown of the options.

PROJECTED 2026 STRUCTURE

Following extensive review and consultation, **Option 1** is the preferred structure for the 2026 season. It offers the best balance between national visibility and regional accessibility, accommodates all current Tier 4 (NCL and SCL) clubs and reflects participation density in key areas such as Yorkshire and the North West. By maintaining five conferences, it supports competitive integrity, reduces travel demands and provides a scalable framework for future growth. This structure aligns with the NCRL's core principles of development, sustainability and regional responsiveness.

Tier	Division / Conference	Estimated Team Count	Notes
Tier 3	National Premier	12 teams	Top half of current Tier 3 clubs based on 2025 finish
Tier 3	National Division 1	12 teams	Top half of current Tier 3 clubs based on 2025 finish
Tier 4	Yorkshire Conference A	10–12 teams	Reflects high participation density
Tier 4	Yorkshire Conference 1	10–12 teams	Balancing travel and standards
Tier 4	North West Conference (incl. Barrow)	10–12 teams	Includes Barrow and the surrounding areas
Tier 4	Cumbria Conference	8–10 teams	Subject to further review and consultation
Tier 4	Southern Conference	8–10 teams	Includes current SCL clubs and potentially new entrants



Promotion & Relegation Between Tier 3 and Tier 4

National Premier Division & Division 1 Play-Offs

Promotion and relegation between Tier 3 and Tier 4 will be determined through structured play-offs. The Tier 3 play-offs mirror the Tier 4 Cross-Conference Play-Offs (CCPOs) to ensure parity in match load and competitive opportunity.

Tier 3 Play-Off Format:

- Week 1: (*Elimination Semi-finals*)
 - 3rd vs 6th
 - 4th vs 5th
- Week 2: (*Semi-finals*)
 - 1st and 2nd (bye in Week 1) play winners of Week 1
- Week 3:
 - Winners meet in the Grand Final

Tier 4 Cross-Conference Play-Offs (CCPOs)

Promotion to Tier 3 (National Division 1) is decided via the CCPOs, involving both “live” and “partially live” conferences.

CCPO Objectives:

- Establish a clear, unified pathway to Tier 3
- Deliver a balanced and engaging end-of-season competition
- Provide recognition and opportunity across all regions

CCPO Structure:

- Two strands:
 - Championship CCPOs – Tier 4 champion + 2 promoted clubs
 - Shield CCPOs – Competitive pathway for non-promotion teams
- Begins with group stage, followed by an eight-team knockout bracket
- Ensures exciting, meaningful matches across all regions
- Promotion awarded to Championship Grand Finalists



Promotion and Relegation Between Tier 4 and Tier 5

Annual Movement Within Regions

Each region will manage promotion and relegation between Tier 4 (National Conferences) and Tier 5 (Regional Leagues) to maintain balanced competition sizes.

Standard Movement:

- Up to 2 teams promoted from Tier 5 to Tier 4
- Up to 3 teams relegated from Tier 4 to Tier 5
- Tier 5 champions automatically offered promotion (if standards met)

Responsive Balancing:

- Adjustments depend on Tier 3 movements
- Ensures each Tier 4 conference maintains 8–10 teams
- Regional balancing applies where multiple conferences exist (e.g. Yorkshire)

Worked Examples

Example 1 – Yorkshire loses 2 teams to Tier 3, North West gains 2 from Tier 3:

- Yorkshire: 2 promoted, no relegation → 2 promoted from Tier 5
- North West: 2 relegated, no promoted → 3 relegated from Tier 4, 1 promoted from Tier 5

Example 2 – North West loses 2 to Tier 3, gains 1 from Tier 3:

- Net loss of 1 team → 1 relegated from Tier 4, 2 promoted from Tier 5

Example 3 – Cumbria loses 1 to Tier 3, gains 2 from Tier 3:

- Net gain of 1 team → 2 relegated from Tier 4, 1 promoted from Tier 5

Example 4 – Equal movement in and out of Tier 3:

- Standard 2 up / 2 down between Tier 4 and Tier 5



Cross-Conference Play-Offs (CCPOs)

The Cross-Conference Play-Offs form a key part of the new national competition calendar, working alongside the National Cup to provide a consistent, engaging season with a natural rhythm of high-intensity “peak” moments throughout the year.

The structure is designed to create more meaningful games, more opportunities for success and a greater variety of opposition across conferences and divisions.

Aims and Objectives

1. Competitive Variety and Development - To provide opportunities for clubs to play against teams from other conferences, adding variety to the season and allowing clubs to test themselves against new opposition as part of long-term development.
2. Marquee Events and Competitive Success - To deliver a series of marquee fixtures and finals moments that elevate the community game, with a structured three-week finals series offering excitement and achievement for all participating clubs.
3. Fair and Transparent Promotion Pathway - To ensure a clear, equitable and exciting process through which clubs from all conferences can earn promotion to Tier 3 and a National Division. To achieve this, we need to develop the following principles.

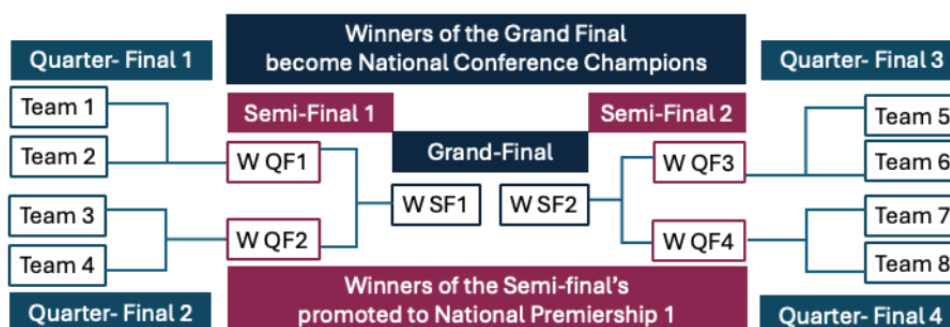
Guiding Principles

- Guaranteed fixtures: Every qualified club should play multiple matches within the play-off format to maximise participation and value.
- Cross-conference competition: Teams should face opponents from different conferences or divisions to broaden experience and increase competitive diversity.
- Transparent promotion process: The pathway to promotion must be clearly defined, equitable and achievable through on-field performance.

Format Overview – Eight-Team Bracket System

To ensure fairness and excitement, the CCPOs will follow an eight-team bracket system, incorporating a group-stage crossover before progressing into the knockout phase.

- Involves eight qualifying clubs drawn from “live” and “partially live” conferences.
- Allows multiple clubs from the same conference to participate, ensuring representation is based on merit rather than geography alone.
- Provides three weekends of meaningful, high-stakes fixtures, mirroring the three-week Tier 3 Premier Division & Division 1 play-off calendar.
- The two promoted clubs will be the Grand Finalists from the Championship CCPO competition.



The same structure would apply for the Shield competition; however, teams involved will compete to be National Conference Shield winners, rather than for promotion.

Cross-Conference Groups

The introduction of cross-conference groups ensures that the end-of-season play-off structure can accommodate any number of teams, while still feeding into the eight-team bracket system that determines promotion and championship outcomes.

Purpose and Function

The primary purpose of the group phase is to determine which clubs progress into the final eight-team bracket.

Each group will advance one or two teams, depending on structure and number of entrants, resulting in eight qualifiers overall.

Group entry and bracket placement will be pre-determined based on league position within each conference.

It is envisaged that:

- A total of sixteen teams across all 5 conferences will qualify for the Championship structure. The number of qualifying positions from each conference is highlighted below.
- Remaining teams that do not participate in the Championship structure will qualify for the Shield competition.

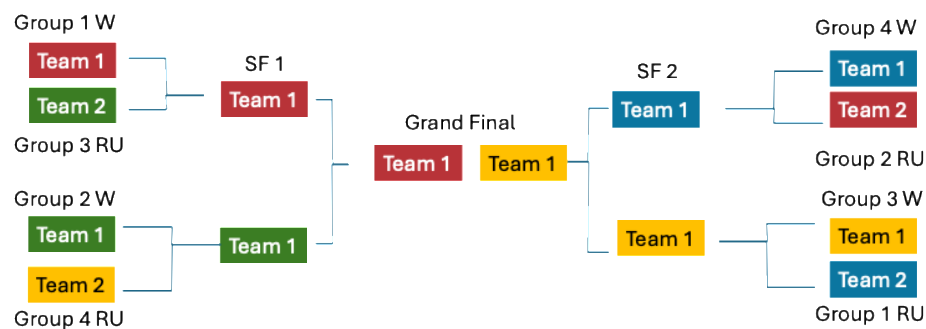
This approach ensures that clubs of similar competitive standing meet appropriate opposition while still providing opportunities for inter-conference variety.



Competitive Logic and Example (Five-Conference)

Under a five-conference setup, group allocation and progression would follow a clear, merit-based pattern:

- Teams finishing 1st in their conference receive a favourable draw, including an additional home fixture, reflecting their season-long performance.
- Each club plays at least two must-win games against three teams from outside their own conference, guaranteeing both freshness of opposition and meaningful competition.
- All teams from each conference can reach the eight-team bracket, meaning two clubs from the same conference could ultimately gain promotion.
- This ensures that the best-performing teams across all conferences have a genuine opportunity to progress, regardless of geography.

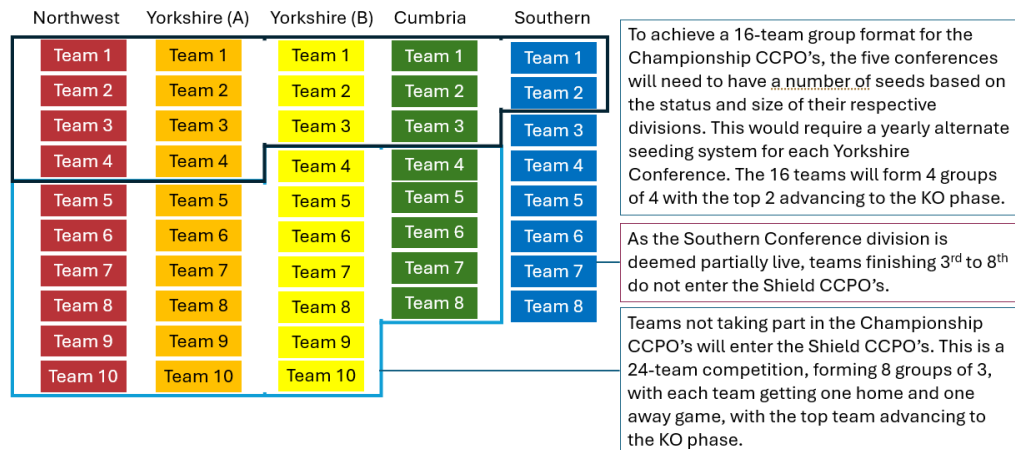


Championship and Shield Alignment

The same predetermined structure applies across both play-off strands:

- The Championship CCPO decides promotion and the overall Tier 4 champion.
- The Shield CCPO offers a parallel competitive pathway for clubs outside promotion contention.

Both formats operate under the same group-to-bracket model, ensuring consistency, fairness and clarity across the entire end-of-season competition.



Cup Competitions

National Cup (Tiers 3 & 4)

- Opt-in knockout format
- Follow-on Shield ensures a minimum of 2 games
- Up to 64 teams may enter
- Cup rounds may overlap with league fixtures or use Bank Holidays

Regional Cups (Tier 5 & Below)

Regional cup competitions will continue to play a crucial role in the open-age calendar. These are delivered at Tier 5 and below, with formats tailored to suit local participation levels and club capacity.

There remains an opportunity for established local cups, including long-standing regional trophies and community-led competitions, to be delivered under the NCRL framework, subject to further agreement and alignment with calendar principles. This ensures that valued traditions can continue while benefiting from consistent governance and scheduling support.

Regional cups provide additional development opportunities, local recognition and competitive variety for clubs outside the national and conference tiers.



Final Series

The Final Series is the concluding three-week phase of the season.

This period brings together the top-performing teams from across the National Premier Division, Division 1 and various Conference divisions, providing a fitting conclusion to the community rugby league season.

In Week 1, the elimination semi-finals involving teams placed 3rd to 6th in both the National Premier and National Division 1 take place. Across the National Conferences, the semi-finals across both the Conference Championship and Conference Shield take place, with the winners of the Conference Championship fixtures achieving promotion to National Division 1.

In Week 2, known as Minor Finals Day, we will have the semi-finals in the National Premier Division and National Division 1, which will determine the teams qualifying for the Grand Final. There will also be finals to crown the Regional Conference Champions and Regional Conference Shield Champions.

Week 3 is Grand Finals Day for Tier 3, where we will witness the championship matches for both the National Premier and National Division 1.

	Week 1 – Semi-finals day	Week 2 – Minor Finals day	Week 3 – Grand Finals day
National Premier & Division 1	Team 3 v Team 6 Team 4 v Team 5 Home grounds	Team 1 v Team 4 Team 2 v Team 3 Division 1 winners promoted to National Premier Home grounds	Team 1 v Team 2 National Premier & Division 1 Champion(s) crowned RFL Hosted
Regional Conference Championship	Team 1 v Team 4 Team 2 v Team 3 Winners promoted to National Division 1 RFL Hosted	Team 1 v Team 2 Regional Conference Champions crowned RFL Hosted	
Regional Conference Shield	Team 1 v Team 4 Team 2 v Team 3 RFL Hosted	Team 1 v Team 2 Regional Conference Shield Champions crowned RFL Hosted	



Future Growth

The introduction of the conference structure provides a flexible framework that supports the future growth of new national conferences.

These can be introduced gradually, allowing emerging competitions to develop, strengthen and gain experience before achieving full “live” status within the National Community Rugby League pyramid.

Potential future conferences could include areas such as Hull, the Midlands or Wales, among others.

This framework provides both ambition and clarity — giving new leagues and teams a clearly defined pathway to the top of the community game, with transparent expectations and development milestones.



Summary - Confirmed Open Age Competition Structure Within the NCRL Framework (2026 Onward)

2026 Season – Confirmed Framework

The following model will be implemented across Tiers 3 and 4 for the 2026 season onwards:

Tier 3: National Divisions

- Two national divisions of 12 teams each:
 - National Premier Division (for the 2026 season, this will be known as the NCL Premier in recognition of NCL's 40th anniversary)
 - National Division 1
- Promotion and relegation: Three clubs move between each national division annually.
- End-of-season play-offs: Three-week finals series culminating in the National Premier & National Division 1 Grand Finals.

Tier 4: National Conferences

- Five National Conferences:
 - Yorkshire A, Yorkshire 1, North West (including Barrow), Cumbria and Southern
- Each conference will operate with 8–10 teams, maintaining regional balance and manageable travel.
- The Cross-Conference Play-Offs (CCPOs) will determine two promotions to Tier 3.
- Conferences may be designated as “live” or “partially live” depending on participation and structure.

The two-division five-conference model (Option 1) was chosen because it offers:

- The broadest national coverage while keeping travel practical for the majority of clubs.
- A structure that accommodates all current NCL teams within the new national/conference framework.
- The flexibility to expand regionally as participation grows.
- A proven competitive and sustainable balance between ambition, cost and inclusivity.

Tier 5: Regional Leagues

- Regional Leagues will continue to operate as flexible, development-focused competitions delivered by the RFL in partnership with regional groups.
- These leagues provide accessible entry points for new or returning teams, and a progression route into Tier 4 for clubs that meet minimum standards.
- Formats may vary by region and include traditional leagues, short-form competitions or hybrid models.

This configuration of two national divisions, five national conferences, and a network of regional leagues was selected because it:

- Balances national reach with manageable travel for most clubs.
- Accommodates all current NCL teams within the new national/conference framework.
- Provides flexibility for regional growth as participation increases.
- Balances competitive ambition with operational sustainability, aligning with the NCRL's long-term vision.
- Ensures a clear and inclusive progression pathway from grassroots to national competition.

A worked example of divisional formats, fixture loads and calendar alignment under Option 1 is provided in Appendix A.



Alongside the two-division five-conference model will sit an integrated National Cup as detailed below.

National Cup (Optional)

- An opt-in knockout competition for Tiers 3 and 4.
- Up to 64 teams may enter, with a follow-on Shield ensuring at least two fixtures per team.
- Designed to add national visibility and competitive variety without placing undue pressure on club resources.

Season Duration and Calendar (Tier 3-4)

- March to late October (approximately 35 weeks).
- Protected weekends for major events and Bank Holidays.
- Reduced league fixture load during peak summer months

The NCRL provides a strategic reset for the men's community game, unifying structure, calendar and progression into a single, sustainable model.

2027 Season

The close of the 2026 season will provide the first opportunity to review and refine the NCRL framework following its inaugural year. The RFL will undertake a comprehensive evaluation across competitive, operational and strategic areas to ensure the model remains effective, sustainable and aligned with the needs of clubs.

Key areas of focus will include:

- Assessment of conference balance and team numbers, ensuring that league sizes reflect participation levels and regional growth.
- Review of the National Cup and Cross-Conference Play-Offs, with adjustments made based on club feedback and fixture completion rates.
- Evaluation of operational delivery, volunteer support and player retention outcomes.

The 2026 season will therefore act as a consolidation and learning phase, ensuring that future iterations of the NCRL continue to evolve through evidence, consultation and collaboration with the community game.



Next Steps: Placement and Governance

To ensure a smooth transition into the NCRL framework for the 2026 season, the following steps will be undertaken:

Club Placement and Tier Review

- Clubs will be provisionally placed into Tier 3, Tier 4, or Tier 5 based on current competition level, performance and operational readiness.
- A placement review process will be available for clubs wishing to be considered for a different tier. This process will assess competitive standards and sustainability.
- Final placements will be confirmed by late November 2025, allowing time for fixture planning.

Establishment of a Management Group for Tier 3&4

- A Management Group will be formed for each NCRL competition at Tier 3 and Tier 4.
- This group will include club representatives, experienced volunteers and RFL staff, ensuring balanced governance and regional responsiveness.
- The group will operate under a formal Terms of Reference, defining roles, voting rights, appointment processes and decision-making protocols.
- Management Groups will play a key role in:
 - Supporting fixture planning and calendar delivery
 - Advising on competition rules and development priorities
 - Representing club interests and regional perspectives
 - Contributing to fair and balanced promotion and relegation decisions

Fixture Publication and Season Launch

- Draft fixtures will be shared in December 2025, allowing clubs to plan ahead.
- The open age season will begin on 7th March 2026, running through to late October.
- The calendar will include league fixtures, cup rounds, play-offs and backlog weekends, with protected dates for national finals and Bank Holidays.



Appendix 1 - Structural Options Considered

The following main options were developed to explore how best to structure the NCRL pyramid at Tier 3 and Tier 4. Each reflects a different balance of national reach, regional responsiveness and competitive integrity.

Formats are illustrative only and based on where clubs finished at the end of the 2025 season. Final configurations may change following club feedback and further consultation.

Key

Current NCL - Yorkshire	Current Regional - Yorkshire
Current NCL - North West	Current Regional - North West
Current NCL - Cumbria	Current Regional - Cumbria
Current SCL - Southern	Current Regional - Southern

Option 1 – 2 National Divisions & 5 National Conferences (2 x Yorkshire, 1 x North West inc. Barrow, 1 x Cumbria, 1 x Southern)

National - Tier 3	
National (12)	Division 1 (12)
Heworth	Dewsbury Celtic
Hunslet ARLFC	Dewsbury Moor
Ince Rose Bridge	East Leeds
Rochdale Mayfield	Egremont Rangers
Siddal	Kells
Thatto Heath Crusaders	Leigh Miners Rangers
Waterhead Warriors	Lock Lane
Wath Brow Hornets	Oldham St Annes
West Bowling	Pilkington Recs
West Hull	Shaw Cross Sharks
Wigan St Jude's	Stanningley
York Acorn	Wigan St Patricks

Conferences - Tier 4				
Yorkshire A (10)	Yorkshire B (10)	North West (10)	Cumbria (8)	Southern (8)
10th - Oulton Raiders - NCL Div 1	6th - Normanton Knights - NCL Div 2	11th - Crosfields - NCL Div 1	5th - Hensingham - NCL Div 2	Bedford Tigers
7th - Drighlington - NCL Div 2	9th - Skirlaugh - NCL Div 2	12th - Woolston Rovers - NCL Div 1	12th - Ellenborough - NCL Div 2	Brentwood Eels
1st - Keighley Albion - NCL Div 3	3rd - Bentley - NCL Div 3	4th - Clock Face Miners - NCL Div 2	7th - Distington - NCL Div 3	Bristol All Golds
10th - Thornhill Trojans - NCL Div 2	11th - Hull Dockers - NCL Div 2	8th - Barrow Island - NCL Div 2	1st - Maryport - CARLA Premier	Eastern Rhinos
4th - Myton Warriors - NCL Div 3	6th - Featherstone Lions - NCL Div 3	2nd - Saddleworth Rangers - NCL Div 3	2nd - Seaton Rangers - CARLA Premier	Hammersmith Hills Hoists
10th - Beverley - NCL Div 3	9th - Milford - NCL Div 3	5th - Leigh East - NCL Div 3	3rd - Wath Brow Hornets A - CARLA Premier	London Chargers
1st - King Cross Park - YML Premier	2nd - Siddal Academy - YML Premier	8th - Millom - NCL Div 3	4th - Lowca - CARLA Premier	North Herts Crusaders
3rd - Spartans - YML Premier	4th - Newsome Panthers - YML Premier	1st - Orrell St James - NWML Premier	5th - Flimby - CARLA Premier	Wests Warriors
5th - Stanley Rangers - YML Premier	6th - Fryston Warriors - YML Premier	2nd - Haresfinch - NWML Premier		
1st - Moldgreen ARLFC - YML Div 1	4th (GF Winners) - Kippax Welfare - YML Div 1	3rd - Blackbrook - NWML Premier		

Option 2 – 2 National Divisions & 4 National Conferences (1 x Yorkshire, 1 x North West inc. Barrow, 1 x Cumbria, 1 x Southern)

National - Tier 3	
National (12)	Division 1 (12)
Heworth	Dewsbury Celtic
Hunslet ARLFC	Dewsbury Moor
Ince Rose Bridge	East Leeds
Rochdale Mayfield	Egremont Rangers
Siddal	Kells
Thatto Heath Crusaders	Leigh Miners Rangers
Waterhead Warriors	Lock Lane
Wath Brow Hornets	Oldham St Annes
West Bowling	Pilkington Recs
West Hull	Shaw Cross Sharks
Wigan St Judes	Stanningley
York Acorn	Wigan St Patricks

Conferences - Tier 4			
Yorkshire (10)	North West (10)	Cumbria (8)	Southern (8)
10th - Oulton Raiders - NCL Div 1	11th - Crosfields - NCL Div 1	5th - Hensingham - NCL Div 2	Bedford Tigers
6th - Normanton Knights - NCL Div 2	12th - Woolston Rovers - NCL Div 1	12th - Ellenborough - NCL Div 2	Brentwood Eels
7th - Drighlington - NCL Div 2	4th - Clock Face Miners - NCL Div 2	7th - Distington - NCL Div 3	Bristol All Golds
9th - Skirlaugh - NCL Div 2	8th - Barrow Island - NCL Div 2	1st - Maryport - CARLA Premier	Eastern Rhinos
1st - Keighley Albion - NCL Div 3	2nd - Saddleworth Rangers - NCL Div 3	2nd - Seaton Rangers - CARLA Premier	Hammersmith Hills Hoists
3rd - Bentley - NCL Div 3	5th - Leigh East - NCL Div 3	3rd - Wath Brow Hornets A - CARLA Premier	London Chargers
10th - Thornhill Trojans - NCL Div 2	8th - Millom - NCL Div 3	4th - Lowca - CARLA Premier	North Herts Crusaders
11th - Hull Dockers - NCL Div 2	1st - Orrell St James - NWML Premier	5th - Flimby - CARLA Premier	West's Warriors
4th - Myton Warriors - NCL Div 3	2nd - Haresfinch - NWML Premier		
6th - Featherstone Lions - NCL Div 3	3rd - Blackbrook - NWML Premier		



Option 3 – 2 National Divisions & 6 National Conferences (2 x Yorkshire, 2 x North West inc. Barrow, 1 x Cumbria, 1 x Southern)

National - Tier 3	
National (12)	Division 1 (12)
Heworth	Dewsbury Celtic
Hunslet ARLFC	Dewsbury Moor
Ince Rose Bridge	East Leeds
Rochdale Mayfield	Egremont Rangers
Siddal	Kells
Thatto Heath Crusaders	Leigh Miners Rangers
Waterhead Warriors	Lock Lane
Wath Brow Hornets	Oldham St Annes
West Bowling	Pilkington Recs
West Hull	Shaw Cross Sharks
Wigan St Judes	Stanningley
York Acorn	Wigan St Patricks

Conferences - Tier 4					
Yorkshire (10)	Yorkshire (10)	North West (10)	North West (10)	Cumbria (8)	Southern (8)
10th - Oulton Raiders - NCL Div 1	9th - Milford - NCL Div 3	11th - Crosfields - NCL Div 1	4th - Ashton Bears - NWML Premier	5th - Hensingham - NCL Div 2	Bedford Tigers
6th - Normanton Knights - NCL Div 2	10th - Beverley - NCL Div 3	12th - Woolston Rovers - NCL Div 1	5th - Dalton - NWML Premier	12th - Ellenborough - NCL Div 2	Brentwood Eels
7th - Drighlington - NCL Div 2	1st - King Cross Park - YML Premier	4th - Clock Face Miners - NCL Div 2	6th - Shevington Sharks - NWML Premier	7th - Distington - NCL Div 3	Bristol All Golds
9th - Skirlaugh - NCL Div 2	2nd - Siddal Academy - YML Premier	8th - Barrow Island - NCL Div 2	7th - Halton Farnworth Hornets - NWML Premier	1st - Maryport - CARLA Premier	Eastern Rhinos
1st - Keighley Albion - NCL Div 3	3rd - Spartans - YML Premier	2nd - Saddleworth Rangers - NCL Div 3	8th - Westhoughton Lions - NWML Premier	2nd - Seaton Rangers - CARLA Premier	Hammersmith Hills Hoists
3rd - Bentley - NCL Div 3	4th - Newsome Panthers - YML Premier	5th - Leigh East - NCL Div 3	1st - Hindley Stags - NWML Div 1	3rd - Wath Brow Hornets A - CARLA Premier	London Chargers
10th - Thornhill Trojans - NCL Div 2	5th - Stanley Rangers - YML Premier	8th - Millom - NCL Div 3	2nd - West Bank Bears - NWML Div 1	4th - Lowca - CARLA Premier	North Herts Crusaders
11th - Hull Dockers - NCL Div 2	6th - Fryston Warriors - YML Premier	1st - Orrell St James - NWML Premier	9th - Heysham Atoms - NWML Premier	5th - Flimby - CARLA Premier	West's Warriors
4th - Myton Warriors - NCL Div 3	1st - Moldgreen ARLFC - YML Div 1	2nd - Haresfinch - NWML Premier	10th - Folly Lane - NWML Premier		
6th - Featherstone Lions - NCL Div 3	4th (GF Winners) - Kippax Welfare - YML Div 1	3rd - Blackbrook - NWML Premier	3rd - Chorley Panthers - NWML Div 1		



Option 4 - 3 National Divisions & 3 National Conferences (1 x Yorkshire, 1 x North West & Cumbria, 1 x Southern)

National - Tier 3		
National (12)	Division 1 (12)	Division 2 (11)
Heworth	Crosfields	Clock Face Miners
Hunslet ARLFC	Dewsbury Celtic	Ellenborough
Lock Lane	Dewsbury Moor Maroons	Hensingham
Rochdale Mayfield	East Leeds	Keighley Albion
Siddal	Egremont Rangers	Kings Cross
Thatto Heath Crusaders	Kells	Kippax
Waterhead Warriors	Leigh Miners Rangers	Leigh East
Wath Brow Hornets	Oldham St Annes	Millom
West Bowling	Oulton Raiders	Saddleworth Rangers
West Hull	Pilkington Recs	Skirlaugh
Wigan St Judes	Shaw Cross Sharks	Thornhill Trojans
York Acorn	Stanningley	

Conferences - Tier 4		
Yorkshire (10)	North West (10)	Southern (8)
Bentley	Ashton Bears	Bedford Tigers
Beverley	Barrow Island	Brentwood Eels
Drighlington	Blackbrook Royals	Bristol All Golds
Featherstone Lions	Dalton	Eastern Rhinos
Hull Dockers	Distington	Hammersmith Hills Hoists
Milford	Haresfinch	London Chargers
Myton Warriors	Heysham Atoms	North Herts Crusaders
Newsome Panthers	Ince Rose Bridge	West's Warriors
Normanton Knights	Orrel St. James	
Siddal Academy	Shevington	
Spartans	Wigan St Patricks	
Stanley Rangers	Woolston Rovers	



