

# FAQs

## Future Structure of the Energia All-Ireland League Women's Division

### **Why was the All-Ireland League Women's Division Review carried out?**

The review was undertaken to ensure the Energia All-Ireland League Women's Division is positioned for long-term sustainability and growth. Over recent seasons, it became clear that the league's structure, provincial balance, and support mechanisms needed to evolve as the women's game expands. The review therefore examined competitive standards, provincial pathways, match volume, and the future pipeline of players and clubs. Its purpose is to create a structure that supports competitive balance and is aligned with the wider Women's Rugby Strategy, ensuring both immediate stability and long-term development for clubs across all four provinces

### **Who was part of the review?**

We conducted an online survey that was completed by players, coaches and club representatives. These results were collated and summarized into themes. We also ran consultation evenings across the four Provinces to gather in-person information. We spent months consulting and discussing the findings and options with Provincial rugby leads, Women's Rugby Chairs, Committee members and internal Irish Rugby staff.

### **What players and coaches told us:**

Players and coaches shared similar concerns about the current competition structure, particularly around predictability and imbalance. Over half felt playoff teams were clear from the start of the season, with 73% noting frequent mismatches in team ability, and over half believing lower-ranked teams are not given enough opportunity to compete and improve. Both groups agreed that changes are needed to increase overall competitiveness. Players emphasized the need for a revised league structure, better alignment between club and representative calendars,

and a review of team composition and eligibility rules. Coaches, meanwhile, suggested introducing a two-tier system to improve competitive balance, adjusting season timing to better accommodate university players, and reviewing competitions such as All-Ireland League Women's competition, Vodafone Women's Interprovincial Championship, and the Celtic Challenge to better attract and retain elite athletes.

### **What clubs told us:**

Clubs highlighted a number of structural and operational challenges within the current system. While they noted that the financial demands of the All-Ireland League Women's Division are somewhat burdensome, their main priorities centered on improving squad depth and player development, refining the competition structure, and strengthening the connection between clubs, the Celtic Challenge, and national teams. Clubs also raised concerns about the disparity in standards between the top and bottom teams, called for fixtures to better reflect player availability alongside clearer, more transparent communication. To improve competitiveness, they suggested introducing playoff-based promotion and relegation rather than automatic relegation.

### **What is the new structure trying to achieve?**

The changes to the All-Ireland League Women's competition are designed with a dual purpose. Firstly, they strengthen the long-term future of the elite Senior Provincial game by building a more robust presence across all four Provinces as we accelerate growth of our Provincial age grade and senior provincial teams over the coming years. At the same time, the new structure aims to lift the competitiveness of teams and fixtures in the short term.

### **What changes are being proposed for the All-Ireland League Women's Division?**

The format for the 26/27 season will move from 10 to 12 teams. Each team will play each other once before splitting into the (top six) playing for the league title and (bottom six) conference division.

### **How will the 12 teams be allocated?**

There will be a provincial distribution of 5 Leinster, 3 Munster, 2 Connacht, and 2 Ulster teams. This priority approach is reflecting both the need to have adequate All-Ireland League Women's Division club representation across the four Provinces at this growth stage in the women's game and the need to increase opportunity for players across the whole of Ireland to compete in the All-Ireland League Women's Division and progress to representative rugby based on their aspiration. This distribution aims to ensure representation, competitive balance, and alignment with the women's player pathway. The model seeks to balance meritocracy with long-term stability, ensuring clubs can plan and grow with confidence.

### **How is a 12-team league achieved for 2026/27?**

The current season is completed as normal.

The four provincial Qualifying League (QL) winners enter play-offs.

Two semi-final winners are automatically promoted.

The two semi-final losers play off; the winner faces the 10th placed Energia All-Ireland League Women's Division team for promotion.

This final match is hosted by the Energia All-Ireland League Women's Division team.

### **What is the League format for 2026/27?**

#### ***Phase 1:***

All 12 teams play each other once (11 matches).

#### ***Phase 2:***

Split into two groups:

Top 6 → League group (compete for League title)

Bottom 6 → Conference group (compete for Conference Cup)

At the end of the season the lowest-ranked team from each province plays their provincial Qualifying League winner in a promotion/relegation play-off.

## **How is the 5:3:2:2 provincial split achieved?**

### ***If the split is NOT achieved by end of 2025/26, for season 2026/27***

- The lowest-ranked team from an overrepresented province is automatically relegated.
- They are replaced by a QL winner from an underrepresented province.
- The second-lowest team from the overrepresented province enters a play-off with their QL winner.
- Additional play-offs take place between the four lowest provincial All-Ireland League Women's Division teams and their QL winners.
- These measures continue until the 5:3:2:2 split is reached.

### ***If the split IS achieved by end of 2025/26, for season 2026/27***

- Four play-offs take place between the lowest-ranked teams and QL winners.
- The structure is then ring-fenced for two seasons:
  - Same format: 11 matches + split into top 6 / bottom 6.

## **What happens after the two ring-fenced seasons?**

The league moves to a merit-based system with two divisions (1A and 1B, 6 teams each).

Qualifying League semi-finals and finals will take place.

Promotion/relegation rules:

1st in 1B replaces 6th in 1A.

6th in 1B is automatically relegated (replaced by QL winner).

5th in 1B plays the Qualifying League play-off finalist; loser is relegated.

## **What are the future plans for the Celtic Challenge?**

The Celtic Challenge is the cross-border competition Ireland currently play in to enable players who currently are or have the ambitions to play for Ireland to train and compete in an elite daily training environment and competition. The evolution of this structure and opposition in the competition is under constant review, to make decisions about the most effective performance plan for Ireland's elite game and National programs.

As a parallel process, we have launched Ireland's four provincial roadmap aiming to build infrastructure and capacity in our four provincial age-grade pathways and senior programs over the coming seasons. Our goals centre around both Ireland's short term national success and sustained, long term success. The pathway and competition model required to achieve this remains under constant review.

**How can Club, Celtic Challenge and National Team programs along the pathway stay connected and communicate effectively through the season?**

The IRFU will host a session with Clubs and National Program leadership pre-season to create most effective communication plan and ways of working framework to support planning across all competitions throughout the season.

**How will clubs outside the All-Ireland League be supported?**

The IRFU and four provinces will work to ensure teams in Provincial Leagues who have the aspiration to play in the All-Ireland League Women's Division have support from their Province to help preparations towards that goal. The goal is to ensure that any club aspiring to join the national tier competition has the stability and capacity to sustain its place and contribute to a competitive league environment. Top emerging Provincial league teams will be included in the All-Ireland League Women's Division Performance Support program referenced below.

**What does this mean for clubs in the short term?**

In the immediate future, clubs can expect increased clarity regarding league structure, support from provinces and expanded competitive opportunities through the new cup competitions. Clubs will also have early visibility of how their provincial representation fits within the wider league model, allowing them to plan for upcoming seasons. This short-term phase is about providing certainty while preparing for a clear, structured, longer-term pathway.

### **Will there be a review?**

The All-Ireland League Women's Division will be monitored weekly re. number of players, points scored, conceded matches, uncontested scrums etc. There will be a mid-season review checkpoint included to help monitor progress.

### **What does this mean for the long term?**

Longer term, the new structure aims to deliver a consistently competitive league that supports player development across all provinces and provides a strong foundation for future investment and professionalisation. The combination of a two-division structure, balanced provincial representation, stable promotion pathways, and a formalised readiness process is intended to ensure the All-Ireland League Women's Division is built on sustainable structures that enhance the quality of rugby and support clubs in their growth ambitions.

### **What is a Club Health Check and how will that benefit my team each season?**

A club Health Check is a process that will be introduced jointly between Irish rugby and the Provinces to help clubs on an annual basis with their season planning and effective season delivery. The process will include a Club Health standards framework which will cover topics from governance and finance, player & coach development, recruitment and age grade development, medical, training and match day environments and communications/public relations.

### **What is a Performance Support Program and how will that benefit my team each season?**

The Performance Support Program is a program that aims to help build performance capacity in priority roles in All-Ireland League Women's Division teams. The program will be a blend of in person workshops and online sessions delivered by Provincial/National performance staff covering key topics critical in season planning. The program will be accessible to key All-Ireland League Women's Division team management to assist with pre and in season planning and delivery and post season debrief.

**What is the role of the Club, Province and Irish Rugby in the All-Ireland League Women's Division:**

The All-Ireland League Women's Division is a national competition and therefore competition regulations, structure, disciplinaries and oversight are the responsibility of the union.

All clubs in the All-Ireland League Women's Division are members of their Provincial Branches. The Provinces run their own Provincial Leagues and play a support role to the All-Ireland League Women's Division clubs in their Province.

As part of system change focused on progressing Women and Girls rugby, we motivate all Club executives to maximise their ambition, leadership and planning in order to elevate and prioritise the standards of their Women and Girls programs ensuring proper resourcing on an annual basis.

## Important Dates

As part of system change focused on progressing Women and Girls rugby, we motivate all Club executives to maximise their ambition, leadership and planning in order to elevate and prioritise the standards of their Women and Girls programs ensuring proper resourcing on an annual basis.

<b>March 28th</b>	Final league games take place. Qualifying League Semi-finals take place with the two winning teams promoted to the All-Ireland League Women's Division for season 2026/27.
<b>April 5th</b>	Losing Qualifying League semi-finalists play off.
<b>April 12th (Sunday - W6N on Saturday)</b>	Winner of the above match plays the 10th placed All-Ireland League Women's Division team for a place in the All-Ireland League Women's Division for season 2026/27. All-Ireland League Women's Division & conference semi-finals take place.
<b>April 19th (Sunday = W6N on Saturday)</b>	Conference final.
<b>April 26th</b>	Energia All-Ireland League Women's Division final.
<b>Governance oversight</b>	Delivery of the All-Ireland League Women's Division competition restructure will shift from the review working group to implementation structure. Rugby Committee have overall oversight of the delivery of competition changes. Internal Irish rugby, Provincial domestic staff and women's rugby provincial chairs will be responsible for delivery of competition changes.
<b>All-Ireland League Women's Division meeting timeline</b>	Meeting timeline and workflow agreed

## **Appendix**

### **Adult Women's Club Competition Review top points in relation to Women's All-Ireland League::**

1. The majority of Players, Coaches and Club Officials thought that the travel demands of the All-Ireland League Women's Division were manageable.
2. Over half of players and coaches felt that the playoff teams were very predictable from the start of the season with over a third stating that they are predictable. Only 6% of players and coaches felt that the playoff teams weren't predictable at all. In line with this, 73% of players and coaches felt that some teams they were playing were either at a much higher or much lower level to them and over half stated that lower ranked teams aren't given the chances to compete and improve in the current competition structure.
3. Clubs felt that the financial demands of the All-Ireland League Women's Division were somewhat burdensome.
4. The top priorities for clubs were squad depth and development, competition structure and the connection between the Club, Celtic Challenge and National teams.

### **Players:**

1. Players wanted a change to the league structure to increase competitiveness of the games.
2. Players wanted better synchronizations between club and representative calendars
3. Players wanted team compositions and eligibility to be looked at.

### **Coaches:**

1. Coaches wanted to introduce a two-tier system to ensure competitive balance.
2. Coaches offered suggestions on season timing to allow university players to join leagues.
3. Coaches noted that current All-Ireland League Women's Division Interprovincial Championship and Celtic Challenge structures aren't ideal to attract and retain elite athletes

**Clubs:**

1. Clubs wanted fixtures to reflect player availability and transparency in communications.
2. Clubs noted that the current competition structure has significant disparity between top 5 and bottom 5.
3. Clubs suggested playoffs for promotion/relegation instead of an automatic relegation.