



Football House
Unit 2/3 Phipps Close
Deakin ACT 2600
PO Box 50 Curtin ACT 2605
T +61 2 6260 4000
info@capitalfootball.com.au
ABN: 16 413 452 268



CAPITAL FOOTBALL

NATIONAL PREMIER LEAGUE REVIEW

FINAL REPORT

In May 2024, Capital Football (CF) established a review of the National Premier League (NPL) and Capital Premier League (CPL) competitions.

Since the 2021 NPL Review, CF management and clubs within the football community had identified risks and issues associated with the current competition structure.

The purpose of this review was to evaluate the NPL and CPL competitions and identifying areas for improvement that will enhance the league structure, including development/pathway opportunities for participants/players to ensure the sustainability of elite football in the CF region.

The Board appointed CF Director Gary Vandeburgt to lead the review and Steve Udjur and Tina McLeary accepted an invitation to be part of the review committee.¹ CF Director Steve Rohan-Jones was added to the committee in September.

Key Principles

Achievable - CBR is a unique football environment due to geography (distance from other centres), demography (proximity of clubs to each other increases resource competition) and control of key resources (namely access to fields). Clubs are the delivery agent and must have the will, capability and aspiration to be part of the PL. Any PL competition must account for the unique environment.

Sustainable - The PL landscape has been continually refreshed since inception 10 years ago. Turnover in structure, coupled with financial elements and the geographic width of competitions previously prevented establishment of a solid base from which to grow the game. Setting a sound foundation provides clubs with the necessary certainty to plan their future.

Simple - Club administration requirements has significantly grown over the duration of the PL. Structures, rules and regulations need to be as simple as possible to give clarity and understanding to players, teams, clubs and officials.

Best v Best - Provide a structure to foster best v best within the capacity of the jurisdiction.

Risks

The review and subsequent implementation of the recommendations aims to mitigate the following risks identified within the environment.

Quality - Existing structures and organisation were unwieldy, complicated and led to a reduction in the overall quality of the PL.

Financial - Football spending appeared unbalanced and targeting sub optimal outcomes.

¹ Three other review committee members were identified and invited to be participate. One declined the invitation due to availability and two agreed to be part of the review but didn't engage in the process.

Behaviours - Existing behaviours were transactional and undermining effective club growth.

Summary of key changes for 2026

| | |
|---|--|
| NPL Women (8 teams) <i>Remains</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 21 rounds - First grade and open reserve grade - 4 team Final Series (3 weeks) | NPL Men (10 teams) <i>Changes</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 18 rounds - 6 team final series (3 weeks) - Introduce preseason comp - No CPL Men's competition <i>Remains</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First grade and U23s |
| NPL Girls (8 teams) <i>Changes</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase to 28 rounds (up from 21 in 2025) - U14, 16 and 18s (15s changed to 16s) - 4 Final Series (2 weeks) | NPL Boys (10 teams) <i>Changes</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase to 27 rounds (up from 26 in 2025) <i>Remains</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - U14, 15, 16 and 18s - Final Series (2 weeks) |

Summary of other key recommendations

- No Riverina clubs to be included in NPL or CF competitions.
- Introduce a representative weekend (juniors and first grade)
- SAP expanded to include U11 and U12s in 2026
- Player payment cap to be introduced into NPL Men and Women
- NPL M & W promotion/relegation play off introduced
- CF to engage with FA about developing our own NPL criteria.

Consultation

Through the review, CF engaged with stakeholders, including CF Clubs (President and Technical Director), Standing Advisory Committees members (PLSAC, CLSAC, JLSAC, RSAC) and CF competitions and technical staff.

A survey was distributed to CF Club Presidents and Technical Directors. The review Committee met with the Technical Directors of the CPLB Canberra clubs and NPL/CPL Club.

President's meetings were held in August 2024 and February 2025 to discuss potential proposed changes to the structure.

The review committee invited Harry Hovasapian (Tigers FC), Chris Webb (Weston Molonglo), Jo Smith (Majura FC) and Matt Faulkner (Capital Football) to participate in a 'war games' discussion to check and challenge the review committees' considerations.

2025 Competitions

As the NPL review didn't commence until June 2024, the CF Board approved a request from the clubs and recommendation from the review committee that no significant changes be made to the competition structures for the 2025 season, unless it was identified as absolutely necessary.

Any proposed changes would be introduced from the 2026 season, to ensure all clubs were aware of the league structure, promotion/relegation requirements and club licensing well in advance of the season commencing.

NPLB/CPLB

The Review Committee identified a risk that at least one club could withdraw from the 2025 6-team CPLB competition. A five team CPLB competition would not be a viable competition. This would likely result in the CPLB competition either combining with the NPLB or the Junior League Div1.

Making the decision to combine the NPL/CPL competitions after the 2025 trial period has commenced, would leave the CPLB clubs and players at a significant disadvantage as some of their existing players may have left to join other clubs.

Moving the CPLB clubs to JL Div 1 in 2025, to then promote two or more teams the following year would also significantly impact those clubs' player retention and capacity to be competitive in 2026.

As a result, the Review Committee recommended that the NPLB and CPLB competitions be combined for 2025 to create a 14 team NPLB competition. This would only apply for 2025.

It provides all clubs with an equal opportunity to justify their ongoing position in the NPLB competition with on-field performance.

2025 League Structure

- NPL Men and Girls - **8 team competition** (21 rounds)
- NPL Women – **8 team competition** (21 rounds) (currently seven teams. CF to identify an 8th team to participate in the NPLW)
- CPL Men's – **8 team competition** (21 rounds)
- NPLB - **14 team competition** (for 2025 only) (26 rounds).
- CPLB – no competition
- Promotion and Relegation at the conclusion of the 2024 season, will be applied as per the Competition Regulations.

2026 Competitions

NPL Women competition

The 2024 NPLW competition has 7 teams, of which four are strong clubs (Belconnen Blue Devils, Canberra Croatia, Canberra Olympic and Gungahlin United) and the bottom three (ANUW FC, West Canberra Wanderers and Tuggeranong United) are continuing to develop. Majura have been invited to participate in 2025, to make an 8-team competition.

Reducing the number of clubs in the NPLW competition to six teams would reduce the opportunities for women and girls to continue to develop and be exposed to the highest level of competition in the region. This is not an option to consider at this time.

2026 Recommendations

NPL Women

- 8 teams
- 21 rounds
- First grade and open reserve grade
- 4 team Final Series (3 weeks)
- Promotion and Relegation as per the 2025 competition regulations

Federation Cup as per 2025 format

No preseason Cup competition

NPL Girls competitions

The NPLG competition has a very balanced spread of clubs throughout the CF region (Belconnen, Gungahlin, Woden, Tuggeranong, Queanbeyan, Inner North and Inner South). This provides young players in each geographical region of the Capital Football region with a local club to aspire to play for.

The most significant change for the NPLG competition in 2026 will be to increase the age groups from the current U14/15/17s to U14/16/18s for 2026.

This change will provide a larger pool of players for each age group, increasing the strength and depth of these competitions, whilst also providing girls an extra year of development in the junior NPL pathway before transitioning to the NPLW.

This change won't impede the best young 15-17 years old female players who will continue to progress to the NPLW competition.

Whilst the NPL is a pathway competition, the social aspect of playing with friends is a significant factor in female footballers continuing in the sport. The change in age groups is intended to provide more young female players with the opportunity to continue to develop in the NPLG competition for another year before progressing to women's football, which in future will result in more participants, increased depth and a stronger more even competition.

2026 Recommendations

NPL Girls

- 8 teams
- 28 rounds
- U14, 16 and 18s
- 4 Final Series (2 weeks)

- Promotion and Relegation as per the 2025 competition regulations

Junior League Girls age groups remain U14, U16 and U18s

2026 Junior League Girls age groups

In 2024, the Junior League Girls competition age groups are U14, 16, 18s, which is the alternate to the NPLG competitions (U14, 15, 17s).

In 2026, with the change of age groups for the NPLG competition it was suggested by some stakeholders that JL Girls age groups should be adjusted to U14, U15, U17s.

The Review Committee agreed not to change the Junior League age groups for two reasons.

- JL Girls U18s competition has a majority of school-based clubs in these competitions. Dropping the age to U17s has the potential to see many Year 12 students too old to compete for their school club. This would then require numerous exemptions to play an age group down or see these girls leave the sport as they are not able to play with their friends.
- The second consideration was that any lower age (15 or 17-year-old) NPLG player that was not selected in the NPLG (U16 and U18) would be more than capable of competing in the JL (U16 or 18) age group.

2026 NPL Men's competitions

Expansion of the NPLM competition to 10 or more teams and promotion and relegation were the two key topics that NPLM clubs were focussed on. There was considerable discussion amongst the football community about expanding to 12 teams, the review committee felt it was difficult to justify an increase of 4 teams to the NPLM competition and whether there was sufficient player depth and quality to cater for this increase.

The review committee has settled on an expansion to 10 teams for 2026. Should there be a demonstrated improvement in the quality and depth of players in the NPLM competition, then expansion to 12 teams could be considered for the 2030 season.

Prior to the 2021 review, inclusion in the NPLM competition was based on the application of a criteria and decision of the CF Board, not on field results. Clubs were all but guaranteed inclusion in the competition until a new application process was implemented.

Since promotion and relegation was introduced, more matches at the end of the season are relevant and have an increased level of importance at both ends of the table. This was demonstrated in 2024 where relegation was decided in the final game of the season.

2026 Recommendations

NPL Men

- 10 teams
- 18 rounds
- First grade and U23s
- No Riverina clubs in NPLM
- 6 team final series (3 weeks)
- Australia Cup as per 2025

Preseason Cup competition

- 2 comps - 1st and U23s
- NPLM clubs compulsory
- Open to 2 x CLO1 clubs
- 3 groups of 4 (plus final)
- Interchange
- 3 x 30 min periods

- NPLM Promotion and Relegation at the end of 2025 season
 - Yoogali FC will not be invited to participate in the NPLM in 2026
 - Top 3 eligible CPLM teams promoted to NPLM

Capital Football to explore a preseason competition with the Illawarra Premier League, where each CF NPL teams plays 4 matches against IPL clubs (2 home and 2 away).

2026 NPL Boy's competitions

Expansion of the NPLB competition was one of the most contention and widely discussed aspect of the NPL review.

In the 2021 NPL review an 8 team NPLB and 8 team CPLB competition was created to accommodate all interest clubs and provide a more even competition. Since 2021, Griffith FC/Riverina Rhinos were removed from the NPLB as they were unable to field an U18s team for multiple years. Weston Molonglo withdrew due to a lack of available players.

As outlined above in the 2025 NPLB competition structure section, there will be a 14 team NPLB competition.

This will be reduced to 10 teams in 2026.

2026 Recommendations

NPL Boys

- 10 teams
- 27 rounds
- U14, 15, 16 and 18s
- Final Series (2 weeks)
- No Riverina clubs in NPLB
- Relegation at the end of 2025 NPLB season will be based off Club Championship (cumulative total of all four grades – equally weighted)
- No promotion from JL Open at the end of 2025

2026 CPL Men competitions

With a 10 team NPLM competition and the removal of the Riverina based clubs, this would leave the CPLM competition with four teams. The remaining four clubs would move to Community League Div1 and 2.

There are currently 4-6 teams in Community League 1 and 2 that would be competitive with the bottom four clubs in CPLM, which would form a strong 10 team 18 round competition, without all the additional NPL Licensing requirements.

As with all CL competitions, there is no restriction on the number of teams a club can enter in CLO 1 and 2.

Riverina Clubs in NPL/CPL

In 2017, Capital Football expanded its region to include teams from Wagga Wagga and Griffith with varying degrees of success. There has been a request from Hanwood FC (Griffith NSW) to enter the CPLB competition in both 2024 and 2025, which has been declined by CF.

Yoogali / Riverina Rhinos

Riverina Rhinos were relegated from the NPLM in 2019. They subsequently withdrew from the CPLM competition and were immediately replaced by Yoogali, who secured promotion to the NPLM at the

conclusion of 2023 CPLM season. They avoided relegation with a win on the final day of the 2024 NPLM season.

Wagga City Wanderers

Wagga City Wanderers have been part of most of the CPLM/CPLB and NPLW and NPLGs competitions in recent years.

At the conclusion of the 2022 NPLW season Wagga were relegated from NPLW. In 2023 they participated in the Community League Women's Div 1 and 2 competition, winning promotion to NPLW for 2024. However, they subsequently withdrew from the NPLW and NPLG competitions due to a variety of reasons.

Wagga have participated and regularly been competitive in the CPL Men and Boys competition. At the end of 2024 they secured promotion to the NPLB competition for 2025, prior to the competitions being combined.

Griffith FC

Griffith FC participated in the NPLB competition until Feb 2023, when they were withdrawn from the competition by CF after they were unable to fill the requirements of entering an U18s team for the second year in a row.

Whilst these Riverina based clubs particularly in the Men's and Boys competitions have been competitive, there is an ongoing challenge for all clubs with the distance, cost, player availability and availability of referees to travel to the Riverina.

With the expansion of the NPLM and NPLB competitions and the subsequent removal of the CPLM and CPLB competitions, the inclusion of Riverina based clubs in Community League Open 1 and Junior League Div 1 is not feasible.

With the NPL competition there is an acceptance that clubs need to travel to the Riverina, however, community and junior players are not willing to travel beyond the previous Capital Football region limits of Cooma, Yass and Goulburn and will subsequently forfeit matches, which significantly impacts on the integrity of the competition and the experience had by all participants.

2026 Recommendation

Yoogali and Wagga City Wanderers will not be invited to participate in the NPLM and NPLB competitions in 2026.

Ground availability

Football Australia Technical recommendation for NPL competitions is that a minimum of 30 round season is held. However, CF does not have sufficient available grounds to play home and away matches across the NPL Men, Women, Boys and Girls competitions through late February and March, which would be required to accommodate a 27-28 match season plus finals.

The ACT Sportsgrounds continue to advise that multiple grounds will be closed through the Autumn shutdown period (last two weeks of March) for training and matches. In addition, many grounds prior to this period are allocated and booked for summer sports like cricket. The AIS also shuts down its fields during this period.

As a result, the review committee has recommended that the NPL Boys and Girls competition include 27-28 rounds, whilst the NPL Men and Women will be 18-21 rounds, plus finals.

The longer season was allocated to the Boys and Girls competition as it will have the greater impact on the player development pathway and it is also where ground allocations are more flexible.

To make up the short fall in matches, a Preseason Cup competition will be held for the NPL Men's, with a separate competition for the U23s.

As the Women's season is 3 weeks longer, there will be no structured preseason comp in 2026.

Should the ground availability issue be resolved through February and March, in future years, the NPL Men and Women's seasons will be expanded to 27-28 round respectively.

Representative weekend

Capital Football's Technical department will work with Football NSW to establish a representative weekend that includes Riverina and Western NSW to potentially be held on the King's Birthday long weekend in June. A North and South Canberra team will be included.

- Age groups initially will be Boys 14, 15, 16 and Girls 14, 16, 18 (to be confirmed by CF Technical dept)
- 3-day tournament
- Matches Sat PM, Sun and Mon AM
- 30 min halves / interchange
- Players will be eligible irrespective of the division (NPL, JL or CL) they participate in
- An independent selection committee is to be established.

Linking NPLM and NPLB competition

There was discussion about linking the NPLM and NPLW competition to force clubs to develop and invest in their youth pathway. ANU Women, Queanbeyan City and Yoogali are currently they only NPL Men or Women's clubs that don't have a Youth pathway.

The NPL has previously had a structure where NPL Men/Boys and Women/Girls competitions were coupled to have the complete pathway, however, this excluded strong NPLM clubs from the competition as they didn't have a pathway. However, in recent years, even without a linked structure clubs have continued to increase their focus and investment in NPL Boys/Girls competitions and their youth development programs.

The Review Committee don't believe it is required to link competitions.

However, it is recommended that it is a requirement for all NPL Men's and Women's clubs to have a junior pathway and teams entered in either the NPL or in each Junior League Div 1 competitions (as outlined below) that are aligned to their first grade program.

- JL Div 1 Boys – (U14, 15, 16s, 18s)
- JL Div 1 Girls – (U14, 16, 18s)

SAP

The establishment of the U13 SAP competitions in 2024 has been a welcomed edition to the development pathway in the CF region.

In 2026 it is recommended that the SAP program be expanded to include the U11 and U12 competition for both Boys and Girls.

All NPL Men's and Women's clubs will be required to have SAP teams in each age group aligned to their first-grade program. This will be a condition of promotion to any NPL competition.

Club Licensing

It was agreed by all clubs there needs to be an administratively simple and enforceable NPL license criteria. The current FA NPL license criteria is not relevant to the CF NPL competition as so many of the criteria are not achievable by any club.

It is recommended that CF explore a CF specific NPL criteria.

Minimum standards for NPL entry:

- Achieved 1 Star status in FA Club Changer program. Working towards 2 Star status by end of 2026 season
 - Registered not for profit organisation
 - Has a SAP program in the U11, U12 and U13s aligned to the NPL first grade team.
 - Has a junior pathway program (either NPL or JL Div 1)
 - Technical Director (min qualifications)
 - Suitable qualified coaches*
 - Finances
 - Most recent audited financial statements
 - All outstanding accounts with Capital Football
 - In the event of a club been unfinancial, they
 - Field
 - Enclosed oval
 - Technical area
 - Changerooms for players and match officials
 - Must have partitioned toilet within all changerooms
 - Secure pathway from field of play to changerooms
- *club will receive a one year exemption to have a coach complete a relevant coaching accreditation. Failure to complete the course, will see the coach ineligible to coach at that level until the course is completed.*

Player Roster Principles

Whilst linking the NPL M/W and NPL B/G competition isn't recommended, the introduction of a player point system is required. FA has developed an updated NPL Player Roster Principles, however this is still administratively complicated.

It is recommended that Capital Football explore introducing their own player point system.

- Minimum no. under a certain age
- Maximum number of players who can transfer from another outside of your pathway

Salary Cap

The introduction of a salary cap was discussed and widely considered. However, monitoring and enforcement of this would be resource intensive for Capital Football staff.

3rd Party payments from sponsors directly to players is also an issue and exploited by a number of clubs. No player in the CF NPL is at a sufficient level where they would receive an individual personal sponsorship. If it is to occur, any sponsorship of individual players needs to occur through the club, not directly with the player and included in the player contract for the respective player.

Instead, a player payment cap would be enforced as outlined below.

- Player payment cap - \$150 p/m
 - Contract for any player paid more than \$150 p/match or who's total payments for the year is greater than \$5000 in total (including signing bonus and 3rd party payments)
 - Should an uncontracted players payments go beyond \$5000 during the season, they would need to submit a contract.
 - Player expense agreement developed for players earning between \$0-150 p/m
 - Clubs paying players more than \$150 p/m without a contract submitted to CF, will be docked 3 points per match the player participated in.
 - CF to develop contract and expense agreement templates
- Mandatory Education

Future reviews / League Expansion

To ensure the structure of the competitions is established that the next NPL review or expansion of the NPL not be considered until the 2030 season.

Proposed regulation changes to be considered

NPL Regulations

- Club Licensing implemented and monitored
- FA Player Roster Principles implemented or CF equivalent developed
 - Within 4 years 50% of a NPL squad must either be a club junior or spent over 7 years at the club.
- Reduce maximum squad size (1st and U23s/Res) to 34 and have a minimum of 6 U21 players in squad
- Player payment cap implemented
- NPL License Fee to be introduced
- Visa player restriction relaxed to not include refugee, student, working holiday, permanent residents. Only those deemed to be in Australia for sporting purposes.
- All NPL clubs required to have a SAP team (comp open to other clubs as well)

Community League 1 and 2

- CLO1 and 2 linked and clubs must enter both grades
- 10 teams / 18 rounds
- No Riverina teams in Community League
- Clubs can have multiple teams in Div 1 and 2

Player movements and Trial periods

- A limit of 5 players are permitted to move/be recruited for any NPL team for the following season. If more than five players move from a team in club A to a team in club B. A points deduction of a minimum of 12 points will be applied to the new club.
- An exemption will apply if a club can demonstrate they have lost a significant number of players to other clubs.
- Trials and grading
 - The NPL and SAP trial/grading period will commence at the beginning the ACT School Term 4 (Monday week 1)
 - For all Junior League competitions (except SAP) trial/grading period will commence from 1 February.
- Exclusive trial agreements are not permitted or enforceable

Promotion & Relegation

- NPLB and NPLG as per the 2024 Regulations – based on club championship
- NPLM and NPLW
 - CL1 clubs will need to declare their interest/eligibility for promotion prior to the commencement of the CL1 season.
 - Interested clubs need to meet the NPL club licensing criteria by 1 March
 - If the first placed CL1 club is not eligible for promotion to NPL, there will be no automatic promotion.
 - In this circumstance, if the 2nd placed CL1 club is eligible for promotion, then a one-legged promotion play off will be scheduled after the NPL Grand Final between the 10th placed NPL team and the 2nd placed CL1 club (first grade only)
 - If both first and second placed CL1 clubs are not eligible for promotion, there will be no promotion and relegation.

CAPITAL FOOTBALL NATIONAL PREMIER LEAGUE REVIEW

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

2025

- NPL Men and Girls - **8 team competition** (21 rounds)
- NPL Women – **8 team competition** (21 rounds) (currently seven teams. CF to identify an 8th team to participate in the NPLW)
- CPL Men's – **8 team competition** (21 rounds)
- NPLB / CPLB - **combined competition** (for 2025 only) (26 rounds)
- CPLB – no competition
- Promotion and Relegation at the conclusion of the 2024 season, will be applied as per the Competition Regulations.

2026

NPL Women

- 8 teams
- 21 rounds
- First grade and open reserve grade
- 4 team Final Series (3 weeks)

NPL Girls

- 8 teams
- 28 rounds
- U14, 16 and 18s
- 4 team Final Series (2 weeks)

- Junior League Girls age groups remain U14, U16 and U18s

NPL Men

- 10 teams
- 18 rounds
- First grade and U23s
- 6 team Final Series (3 weeks)

NPL Boys

- 10 teams
- 27 rounds
- U14, 15, 16 and 18s
- 4 team Final Series (2 weeks)

- No Riverina clubs in NPL Men or Boys

- NPLM Promotion and Relegation at the end of 2025 season
 - Yoogali FC will not be invited to participate in the NPLM in 2026
 - Top 3 eligible CPLM teams promoted to NPLM
- NPLB Promotion and Relegation at the end of 2025 season
 - Relegation at the end of 2025 NPLB season will be based off Club Championship (cumulative total of all four grades – equally weighted)
 - No promotion from JL Open at the end of 2025
- *NPLM - 6 team final series format*
 - *Wk1 - 1st and 2nd – Bye / 3rd v 6th & 4th v 5th*
 - *Wk2 - 1st v lowest ranked team to progress & 2nd v highest ranked team to progress*
 - *Wk3 – Grand Final*
- Explore the introduction of a CF U18 Youth Cup (Girls in 2026 and Boys in 2027)