

# **Merseyside Chess Association League Restructure plans for 2026/27 season**

February 2026

## **Introduction**

On Thursday 8th January 2026 Merseyside Chess Association (MCA) Executive Committee met and considered the possibility of introducing a completely new structure and approach to the way leagues operate.

Although the Committee did not commit to a specific structure and approach, it was decided that:

- The current league structure and approach would no longer be used
- The new structure and approach would be broadly based on the proposals of Jim Gallagher that were presented at the meeting
- The actual structure and approach would be decided following a further meeting of club representatives before the end of the season.

This discussion paper shall form the basis of the discussion between club representatives with the aim being to work out exactly which approach should be taken and how it will operate.

It may be necessary to hold more than one meeting of club representatives and the MCA President has confirmed that, if necessary, this will be arranged.

The principle underpinning all these proposals is that all clubs will have only one team in the 1<sup>st</sup> division, which reflects the principle of the original proposal presented to the Executive Committee.

## **Key Aim**

The key aim of the re-structuring exercise is to redress the imbalance between smaller and bigger clubs by providing mechanisms for smaller clubs to benefit from top tier chess, thus making them more likely to attract stronger players and thereby increasing the pull factor of those smaller clubs.

## **Current Position**

Chess on Merseyside operates on the basis that clubs may enter as many teams as they wish into the MCA league competitions. Bigger clubs generally have more teams in the MCA league competitions, often having more than one team in a division and their size means also that they will attract the strongest players, which, when combined, has often meant bigger clubs maintain more than one team in the first division.

Because the number of places in each division is limited, smaller clubs have been unable to compete in the higher leagues unless they themselves grow to become bigger clubs and can, therefore, attract more members and stronger players.

The fact that bigger clubs have often more than one club in the top tier divisions in itself hinders the ability of smaller clubs to grow, as smaller clubs would not have the ability to attract stronger and more ambitious players due to the fact that the smaller clubs are less able to offer top tier chess.

## **General Trend**

Most of the 13 clubs across Merseyside never, or very seldom, get to occupy one of the league places available in the first division, since the bigger clubs are occupying such positions and, over time, this has

contributed to a decline in the fortunes of the smaller clubs on Merseyside which, if continued, could see many of these clubs cease to exist whilst the larger clubs grow ever stronger, which further exacerbates the trend.

### Options Appraisal

Option 1: 8 Teams in Division 1	
<p><u>Summary:</u> Each club shall be allowed to field no more than one team in the first division. The 1<sup>st</sup> division shall remain at its current size with teams playing twice.</p> <p><u>Operating Model:</u> The team finishing bottom of Division 1 will be relegated to Division 2. The highest finishing team in Division 2 would be declared the MCA Division 2 champions, but the team will only gain promotion to the first division if it does not already have a team in the first division or their existing team in Division 1 finishes in the relegation position. In this instance the club would keep a team in the first division and second division the following season. If the team finishing highest in Division 2 is not eligible for promotion, then the next highest finishing team that does meet the stated criteria will be offered promotion to Division 1 in place of the relegated team.</p> <p>There must be at least 2 eligible or “First teams” competing in Division 2 for automatic promotion of a 1st team to be to be implemented. Where there is only one eligible first team in Division 2, that team will have a playoff at the end of the season, with the team due to be relegated from Division 1. The winner of this playoff will then gain the place in the first division the following season.</p> <p>The team finishing with the fewest points in the second division will be relegated to Division 3 regardless of this being a first, second or third team from their club. Except for what is described above, all other leagues operate as they currently do.</p>	
Advantages	Disadvantages
Provides opportunities for members of smaller clubs to play in the premium Division and against top players	This could result in bigger clubs losing members if they are unable to play in the 1 <sup>st</sup> Division
Could result in the growth of smaller clubs if players from bigger clubs leave and then join smaller clubs	Winning Division 2 would not lead automatically to promotion, potentially demotivating Division 2 players.
Broadly maintains the current number of divisions and teams. Changes only how the higher leagues operate, thus minimizing the overall transition impact.	Members of chess clubs may be confused by the changes and may, during the season, not be aware of the implications of the performance of the team they play for.
Increases the number of clubs represented in division 1	Will require MCA rules to be revised
Will lead to more competitive top-level chess since clubs will only be able to field a single team in the 1 <sup>st</sup> division and will, therefore, always select their top players from within the club.	Could potentially cause extreme results when the stronger teams in the division play against the weaker teams
Will improve internal club competition for the limited number of places in the 1 <sup>st</sup> Division.	

Option 2: 11 Teams in Division 1	
<p><u>Summary:</u> Each club shall be allowed to field no more than one team in the 1<sup>st</sup> Division. The 1<sup>st</sup> Division shall increase to 11 (or more) teams, and they will play each other once only.</p> <p><u>Operating Model:</u> The operating model for this option is the same as Option 1, except for the fact that the 1<sup>st</sup> Division shall operate with 11 teams and shall be based on playing each other once rather than twice</p>	
Advantages	Disadvantages
Provides opportunities for members of smaller clubs to play in the premium Division and against top players	This could result in bigger clubs losing members if they are unable to play in the 1 <sup>st</sup> Division
Could result in the growth of smaller clubs if players from bigger clubs leave and then join smaller clubs	Winning Division 2 would not lead automatically to promotion, potentially demotivating Division 2 players.
Increases the number of clubs represented in division 1 to almost all clubs	Members of chess clubs may be confused by the changes and may, during the season, not be aware of the implications of the performance of the team they play for.
Will lead to more competitive top-level chess since clubs will only be able to field a single team in the 1 <sup>st</sup> Division and will, therefore, always select their top players from within the club	Will require MCA rules to be revised
Will improve internal club competition for the limited number of places in the 1 <sup>st</sup> division.	Reduces the number of competitive games played during the season.
Reduces the number of competitive games played during the season, thereby increasing opportunities for internal chess club development initiatives	Could potentially cause extreme results when the stronger teams in the division play against the weaker teams

Option 3: Club teams restricted to their respective divisions
<p><u>Summary:</u> All club 1st teams would play in Division 1, all club 2nd teams in Division 2, all club 3rd teams in Division 3, All other 4th/5th/6th teams would play in remaining lower divisions.</p> <p><u>Operating Model:</u> This option, for each of the top 3 divisions, aligns the team number of each club, with the division that they are allocated to. For the top 3 divisions, each division would operate independently and be a mini league competition in and of itself. There would, therefore, be a champion club/team declared for each of those divisions each season.</p> <p>There would be no promotion or relegation other than between Divisions 4 and 5 with the highest team in Division 5 being promoted to Division 4 and the lowest team in Division 4 being relegated to Division 5, which has no restrictions on how many teams per club take part in these divisions.</p>

Advantages	Disadvantages
Provides opportunities for members of smaller clubs to play in the premium division and against top players	This could result in bigger clubs losing members if they are unable to play in the 1 <sup>st</sup> Division
Could result in the growth of smaller clubs if players from bigger clubs leave and then join smaller clubs	Will require MCA rules to be revised
Increases the number of clubs represented in Division 1 to almost all clubs	Could potentially cause extreme results when the stronger teams in the division play against the weaker teams
Will lead to more competitive top-level chess since clubs will only be able to field a single team in the 1 <sup>st</sup> division and will, therefore, always select their top players from within the club	Elimination of promotion between the top 3 divisions would demotivate club players who see no opportunity for their club to advance via promotion.
	Imbalance in the number of teams in a division would make administration of leagues difficult
	Imbalance in the number of teams in a division could make some divisions unviable if clubs had too few teams
	Takes no account of the playing strength of each team which could lead to single team repeatedly winning a division.

Option 4: Super League	
<p>Summary: Creation of a 'Super' or 'Premier' chess league with Division 1 being divided into Division 1a and Division 1b.</p> <p>Operating Model: The creation of Division 1a and Division 1b would mean that every club on Merseyside would have a team in either Division 1a or Division 1b. Division 1a would be for the highest ranking 50% (or greater) of MCA clubs and Division 1b would be for the lower ranking 50% (or lower) of MCA clubs. The highest finishing team in Division 1a would be declared Merseyside champions for that season. The Highest finishing team in Division 1B would be promoted in place of the lowest finishing team in Division 1A each season. No team would be relegated from Division 1b</p> <p>The remaining divisions would operate in the same manner as they do at present with no restrictions on how many teams from each club play in each of these divisions</p> <p>The highest finishing team in Division 2 would be declared Division 2 champions but not gain promotion to either Division 1 Super League</p>	
Provides opportunities for members of smaller clubs to play in the premium division and against top players	No promotion between Division 2 and the super league

Could result in the growth of smaller clubs if players from bigger clubs leave and then join smaller clubs	Depending on the number of clubs, the number of competitive matches for the teams in the super league could be reduced
Increases the number of clubs represented in Division 1	Will require MCA rules to be revised
Operation of such leagues would be clear and easily understandable by club members	Could result in bigger clubs losing members if they are unable to play in the first division
Increases the number of clubs represented in Division 1	
Will lead to more competitive top-level chess since clubs will only be able to field a single team in the 1 <sup>st</sup> division and will, therefore, always select their top players from within the club.	
Potentially fewer games in the super league could increase opportunities for internal chess development within clubs	
Broadly maintains the way the current number league structures operate as the super league could be considered a supplementary competition, making operating relatively straight forward	

### **Transition Arrangements**

There have already been sufficient opportunities for discussions resulting in the decision to move ahead by implementing the new structure. It is therefore not proposed that there be any delay in the transition arrangements meaning the preferred option is implemented in time for season 2026/2027.

### **Review**

The new agreed structure will be allowed to run for a period of 2 full seasons after which there will be a formal review of whichever operating model has been implemented.

This will be an opportunity to consider and implement any necessary changes required to improve the structure further or consider other alternatives.

### **Conclusion**

All the above options achieve the central aim of implementing a league structure that provides the opportunity for smaller clubs to compete alongside bigger clubs. Because there are 4 options presented based on the ideas generated by MCA committee members present at the 8th January meeting, it does not mean that there are no other options available. However, the 4 options presented are sufficiently wide in scope and they are likely to represent the main realistic options.

Advantages and disadvantages of each of the options have been presented and, on that basis, option 3 is likely to be considered unrealistic given that the disadvantages far outweigh the advantages both in scope and depth. Option 3 should, therefore, be discarded.

Option 2 has the same number of advantages as disadvantages which are similar in scope and depth, which means it is a generally balanced proposal. Option 2 is similar to Option 1 in its design and may be considered as a close alternative to Option 1 but a significant and radical change moving to 11 teams from 8 and only playing each other once a season.

Option 1 and Option 4 show more advantages than disadvantages, which indicates that the preferred option should be one of these two.

Option 1, Option 2 and Option 4 align with the key aim of providing smaller clubs the opportunity to join bigger clubs and compete at the top tier of league chess if their club choose to do so.

Options 1 and option 2 continue the promotion and relegation interest between all MCA Divisions, whilst Option 4 creates a premium divisional structure whilst creating a barrier between stronger and weaker teams to allow more balanced competition in each super league sub division.

Option 1 whilst having more advantages than disadvantages whilst also aligning directly with the key aim of bringing together 1<sup>st</sup> teams of most MCA clubs into a single-league division.

Option 1 also maintains the current 8 first division teams league structure and opportunity for promotion and relegation and is, therefore, the obvious and most likely proposal that will increase the number of smaller clubs represented in Division 1 whilst minimising the number of changes required to implement.

Option 1 is, therefore, the preferred option to take forward

### **Recommendation**

The Sub-Committee is asked to agree that:

- Option 1 is the preferred option, and the MCA Executive Committee should be advised as such.
- There are no realistic or practical transition arrangements that can be implemented and the preferred option should be implemented as is and without any intermediate arrangements.
- The preferred option, once implemented, should be subject to a full review after 2 years of full operation.
- The MCA Executive Committee should make the necessary arrangements to implement the option recommended by this Sub-Committee for implementation in time for the 2026/2027 season.

### **Next Steps**

At the earliest opportunity, the outcome and actions agreed by the Sub-Committee shall be referred back to the Executive Committee for acceptance and implementation