

FC United of Manchester and Stockton Town

Written Reasons

The Northern Premier League does not normally issue written reasons for operational decisions. However, the League recognises the strength of feeling amongst fans relative to its decision for the League match between FC United of Manchester vs Stockton Town to be played at a neutral venue on 21st April 2026.

Background

Following a sixth postponement of the original fixture on 24th March 2026 the League received an application from Stockton Town for the re-arranged fixture to be played at a neutral ground, centrally located between the two Clubs.

Stockton Town also made application under FA Standardised Rule 8.40 for the reimbursement of travelling expenses in relation to the FCUM v Stockton Town scheduled game on 24th March 2026 which was postponed for weather-related reasons and was the sixth time this fixture had been postponed in the 2025/26 season. This matter was dealt with and the Clubs were informed of decision. FC United of Manchester did not appeal against this decision.

Re-arranged fixture

As with all operational matters, Stockton's Town's application was considered by the relevant League officers, under FA Standardised Rule 8.7.2, taking into account factors including past record of weather-related postponements, precedent, and the integrity of the competition, being the primary function of the Northern Premier League under its Terms of Reference as an affiliated League from the Football Association.

FA Rule 8.7.2 states that *The Board shall have the power to decide whether a ground is suitable for Competition matches and to order a Club whose ground is deemed unsuitable to play its home matches at an alternative suitable ground.*

Like other Leagues in the National Leagues System, the Northern Premier League's Executive has delegated powers to deal with operational matters, with these decisions being subsequently ratified by the full NPL board.

However, due to the potential impact of the outcome of this fixture on the NPL Premier Division Championship and Play-Off placings, the Executive correctly consulted with the NPL board. No Directors involved in this consultation and subsequent decision were involved with Clubs involved in either the play-offs or the title race, and two are independents.

In reaching the original operational decision, the NPL Executive's primary concerns were for the integrity of the competition; specifically, the need to complete all fixtures in the regular competition on Saturday 25th April. The commercial interests of both Clubs were also taken into account.

In reaching the original decision the Board also took the following factors into consideration:

- In accordance with League rules, the two Clubs had agreed that April 21st was the only date when the fixture could be scheduled, this date being in the final week of the 2025/26 season, and the impact of the result on final placings. The majority of the Stockton Town players had taken seven half day holidays for the six scheduled dates for the fixture to be

played and whether Stockton Town FC should have to do so again to fulfil the seventh scheduled date

- The continued poor condition of the pitch at Broadhurst Park. Six scheduled League fixtures have been postponed in the 2025/26 season for weather-related reasons (principally drainage related) which is two more than any other Premier Division Club.
- The risk of the re-scheduled fixture on 21st April being postponed, thereby jeopardising the integrity of the competition relative to Play-Offs and, subsequently allocations for the 2026/27 season.
- That Broadhurst Park will host the Manchester Senior Cup on Wednesday 15th April, adding to the risk of postponement of the re-scheduled FCUM v Stockton Town fixture on 21st April, seven days later.
- Past precedent relating to requiring other NPL Clubs to play fixtures at neutral venues for several reasons under Rule 8.7.2 for different. Clubs affected have included Dunston, Carlton Town, Anstey Nomads, Trafford, Liversedge and Sheffield. This approach is consistent with those taken by the Southern and Isthmian Leagues and is done in accordance with published Rules and Policies.

The original decision

Taking into account all of the above, and following consultation with the board, the operational decision was to instruct FC United of Manchester to source a neutral ground to Grade 3 or above standard on a 3G surface for the fixture to take place on 21st April 2026.

Why was the original decision reconsidered?

Following a request from FC United of Manchester to reconsider the decision, including the provision of more information related to the Broadhurst Park pitch, the Chief Executive referred the matter to the full board.

The original decision was only revisited due to concerns around sporting integrity.

The directors took into consideration the information and photographs supplied by FCUM in respect of pitch works, the possibility of intervening games going ahead without weather-related interruption and any other unintended consequences.

Decision confirmed

It was determined that the original decision would stand, other than the requirement to stage the re-arranged fixture on a 3G pitch, accepting FCUM's submission that all reasonable attempts to source a 3G pitch to the necessary standard had been exhausted, and accepting Curzon Ashton FC as a suitable neutral venue.

The decision was made for the following reasons.

- As the re-arranged fixture can only take place in the final week of the season, the risk to the competition of a further postponement if played at Broadhurst Park is too high. This is based, not only the number of weather-related postponement in the 2025/26 but in past seasons also.

- The counter proposal by FC United of Manchester to wait until the week of the game to make a decision on where the game may be played was discounted. The board determined the game needed to be scheduled and the detail published to provide clarity to both teams, and their fans.
- The fact that Broadhurst Park would be hosting the Manchester Senior Cup final one week earlier had not been addressed by FCUM in correspondence, thereby further heightening the risk of the pitch being in a poor condition and unable to cope with any wet weather.
- The weather forecast remains extremely variable, and the League has lost games in April to the weather in recent years.

Ultimately, the Board deemed it unfair to delay the decision where the game would be played until the week of the fixture. The decision was unanimous.

This decision was not appealed by FCUM, as confirmed in the joint statement with the NPL of 7th April.

Governance

It is long-standing NPL policy, endorsed by the 2024 Sport England Review of NPL Governance that NPL directors are conflicted in discipline-related cases involving Clubs in the same division. However, as with the original decision, this did not apply in this case because this was an operational matter.

It should also be noted that the Terms of Reference for all directors of the NPL state that all Board members' remit includes the following, which are endorsed by Sport England:-

- a) Uphold the highest standards of governance, ensuring the League operates in compliance with applicable laws, regulations, and best practices.
- b) Assess and manage risks associated with the League's operations, ensuring that appropriate risk mitigation strategies are in place.
- c) Ensure that the League maintains high ethical standards and complies with all relevant regulations, including those relating to financial integrity, anti-corruption, safeguarding, and fairness.

Other considerations

The following points have been raised in correspondence subsequent to the announcement of the terms under which the re-arranged FCUM v Stockton Town fixture would take place at Curzon Ashton would go ahead on Tuesday 21st at Curzon Ashton FC.

The following are therefore provided in a spirit of transparency.

- ***Why were FCUM not contacted for their thoughts after you received the complaint from Stockton?*** As part of the claim for travel received from Stockton, FCUM was asked for their observations surrounding the postponement. A response was received from the Club on 28/03. This information was considered by the League.
- ***Why was no consideration given to the commercial interests of FCUM?*** Consideration was given to this factor, but it was secondary to the necessity to have the game played on time to maintain the integrity of the whole League.

- ***Do you feel it is appropriate that FCUM's voice was not heard as part of your evidence gathering to reach your original decision?*** We had received the observations of FCUM on 2nd April as part of an application to revisit the original decision. This correspondence of 02/04 provided much more detail and some photographic evidence, again this was circulated and duly considered by the directors.
- ***Do you not feel that there was clear conflict of interest in board members associated with Clubs in the same division being involved in the decision-making process around FCUM's counter proposal?*** No. None of the Clubs the directors represent will be involved in the play offs. Furthermore, this was not a disciplinary hearing but an operational decision in accordance with rule 8.7.2. As with all League decisions, the Club were advised of the right of appeal to The Football Association. No appeal was lodged.

Summary

The fundamental issue is the condition of the Broadhurst Park pitch. The League accepts FCUM is making strenuous efforts to address these issues but was not convinced that those efforts outweighed the risk to the competition of a further postponement.

Accusations of poor Governance in relation to this case are not valid because, as with similar decisions made in respect of other NPL Clubs, they are an operational matter, dealt with by officers of the League under delegated powers.

No League at Steps 3-4 of the National League System can involve its directors in every operational decision. However, on this occasion the opinion of directors was sought in accordance with FA Rules and Regulations and Sport England's best practice in governance, approved unanimously by NPL Clubs at our 2024 AGM.

Northern Premier League
9th April 2026