

National League Reconstruction Report 2011

Introduction

This report has been produced by the Cricket Scotland Future Structures Group (FSG). The formation of the group was approved by the Cricket Scotland Board of Directors. Its remit was to review both the historical and current operation of the Scottish National Cricket League (SNCL) and to consider the most appropriate future structure for the domestic club game in Scotland. The group was asked specifically to formulate and present policy recommendations on the future of the SNCL to the Board of Cricket Scotland and to relevant clubs, leagues and associations. The FSG is one of three sub groups reporting to the Cricket Scotland Domestic Cricket Committee along with the Clubs Officials and Facilities Group and the Competitions Management Group

Composition of Future Structures Group

The group was selected by Cricket Scotland to provide a balanced representation of both Cricket Scotland professional staff and key stakeholders in both the SNCL and the wider body of Scottish Cricket. The Group members for the purposes of the review were;

Andy Tennant - Cricket Scotland, Head of Performance
Brian Forrester – Carlton CC, Club Administration Representative
Tom Halpin – Prestwick CC, WDCU Representative
Bruce Dixon – West Lothian CC, ESCA Representative
Bob McFarlane – Rossie Priory CC, S&PU Representative
Steve Paige – Cricket Scotland, Head of Community Development
Roddy Smith – Cricket Scotland, Chief Executive Officer
Ricky Bawa – Uddingston CC, Premiership Players Representative
Richard Young – Weirs CC, Championship Players Representative

Consultation and Review Process

The group met four times in a ten week period commencing in early June. The consultation process covered the following key areas –

- Suitability of current and previous structures
- An electronic survey of all current SNCL players
- Consultation with key stakeholders and establishing options for future structures
- Feedback on potential future structures from Regional Leagues Associations
- Consideration of Cricket Scotland policy, player pathway and domestic strategy.

• Suitability of Current and Previous Structures

It became clear very early in the consultation process that the current 31 team two division structure has not been popular with players or administrators. The lack of home and away fixtures against all other teams in the division is perceived as undesirable and inequitable. Further to this, the late season split with four team play offs has provided significant logistical problems scheduling 2nd XI fixtures and a resultant knock on effect for fixture scheduling throughout the regional feeder league network. It is clear that the poor weather and large number of cancelled matches in the 2011 season has exacerbated clubs' frustrations, This should not however mask the fundamental problems that have been caused by the implementation of the latest SNCL format.

FSG Recommendation 1: The 16 team league format with late season split should not be considered moving forward and that a new format should be introduced in 2012

The Group also considered the previous SNCL format which has in general consisted of three divisions of ten teams. It is clear that when the SNCL was formed in 1998 by the merger of the then Scottish Cricket League and the Western Union that around thirty teams was the natural number given the amount of teams involved in the merger. The number of clubs in the SNCL has remained between thirty and thirty four in the thirteen years of competition to date. The Group strongly believe that there are not 32 teams currently playing to a standard that merits inclusion in a “national” league. Further evidence to support this belief will be presented later in this document when the future options are discussed.

FSG Recommendation 2: The number of teams in any future National League should be reduced to ensure that a higher minimum standard of play prevails. This will in turn protect the integrity of the league. In addition enhanced development and facilities criteria, which are more easily measured, should be introduced and strictly enforced to improve standards.

- **SNCL Player Survey**

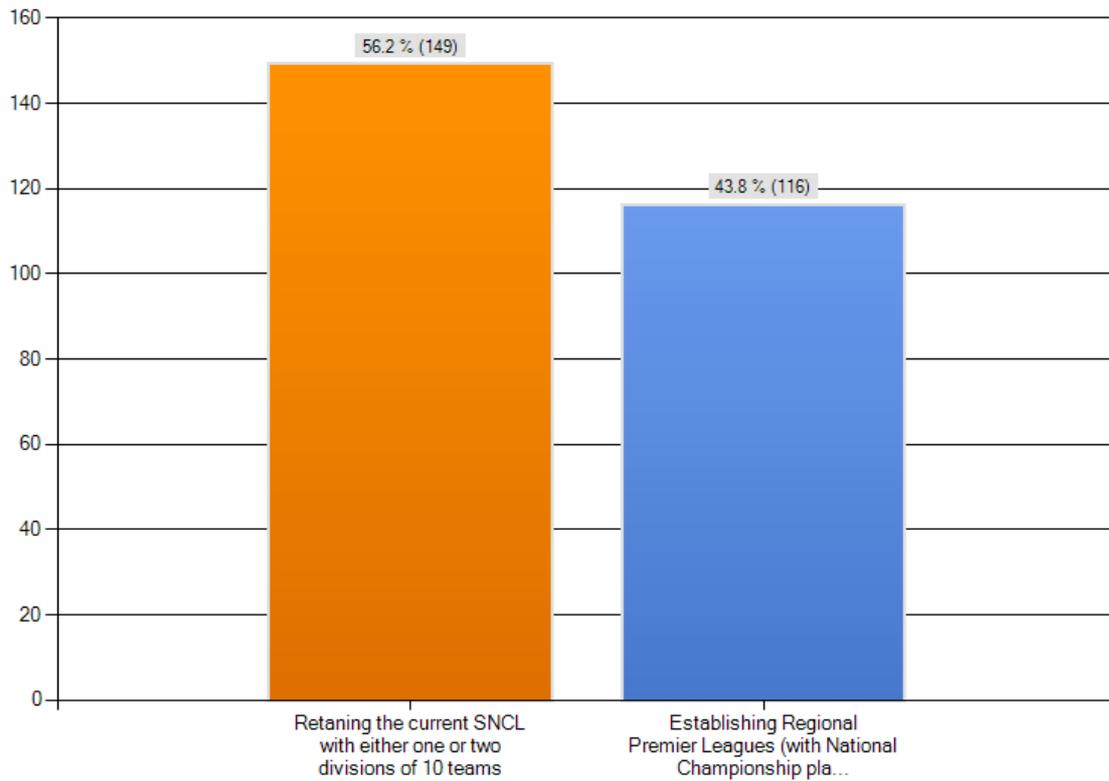
A Survey of current SNCL cricketers was considered an integral part of the consultation process. While it is evident that the opinions of current players alone may not be the best guide to optimal league structures, it is recognised we need listen to the opinions of the people who play the game week in and week out. The method used to survey the players was as follows –

1. Cricket Scotland contacted each SNCL club and requested a list of e-mail addresses for current SNCL players
2. Each player was then sent a web link to an electronic survey which asked 10 multiple choice questions
3. The first section of the survey established key details about the player including, club, age and participation level
4. The middle section of the survey established players’ preferences on viable potential future structures
5. The final section of the survey requested additional preferences from players on a variety of other issues such as start times, preferred cup formats and views on T20 competitions

It is estimated that around 400 surveys were received by current SNCL players. There were 265 responses to the survey, giving a response rate of around 66%. This is significantly higher than average for an online survey, and as a result the Future Structures Group is confident the survey gives a valid picture of players’ opinions and preferences. The only imbalance worthy of note is that a higher number of Premiership players (153 or 58%) responded to the survey than championship players (112 or 42%). We have, however, shown a breakdown of the key opinions and preferences for both Premiership and Championship players, where appropriate. As a result, the tables below reveal the overall results from every respondent, followed by a breakdown of Premiership players and by Championship players. The tables also show a breakdown of responses to the three questions in the Survey that are most relevant to the league reconstruction debate

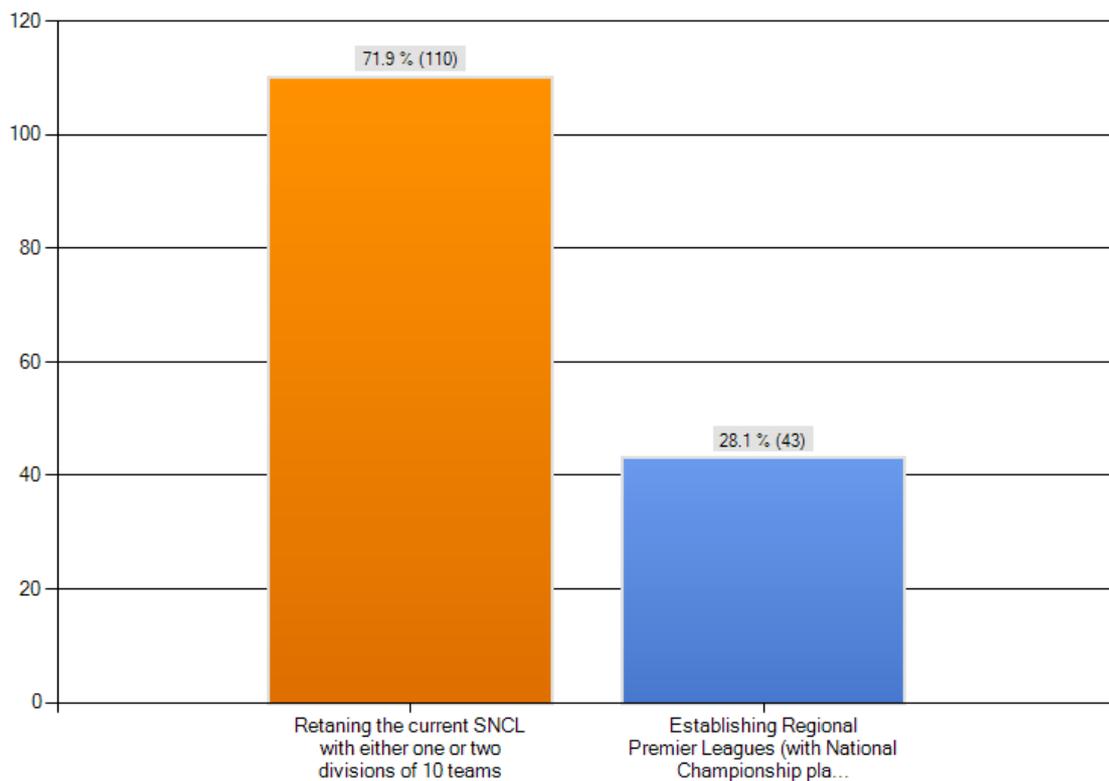
National League or Regional Leagues – All Respondents

In principal, which type of league structure would you most prefer?



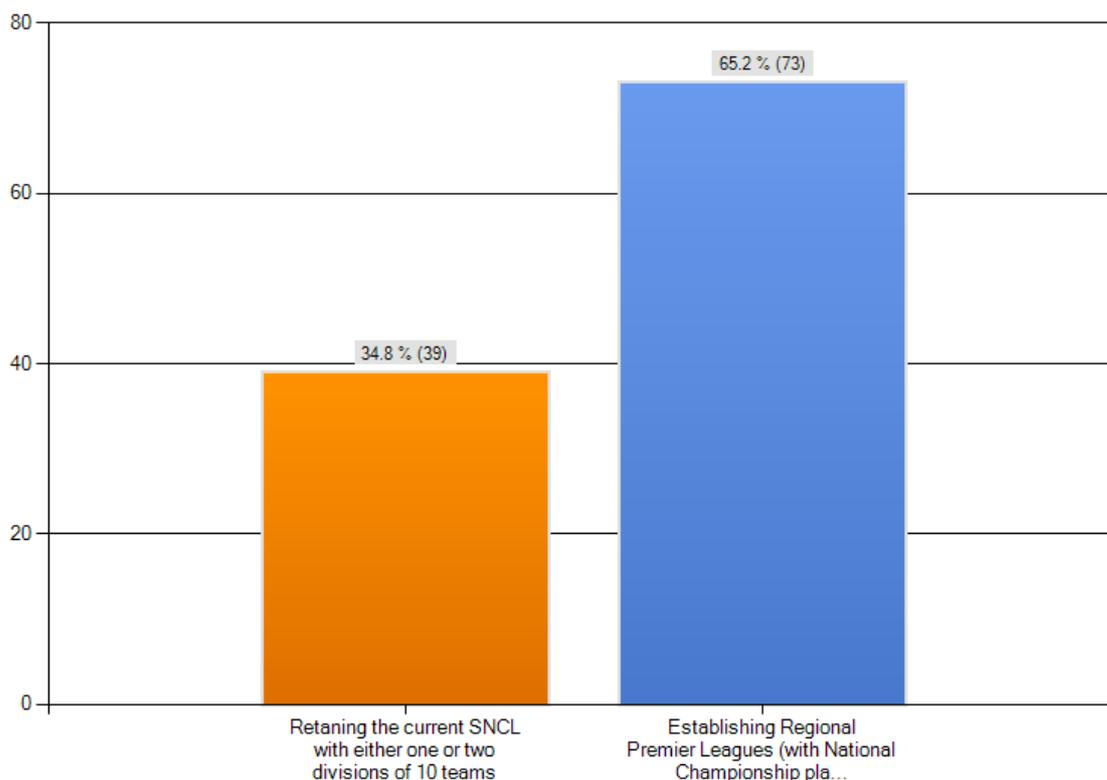
National League or Regional Leagues – Premiership Players only

In principal, which type of league structure would you most prefer?



National League or Regional Leagues – Championship Players only

In principal, which type of league structure would you most prefer?

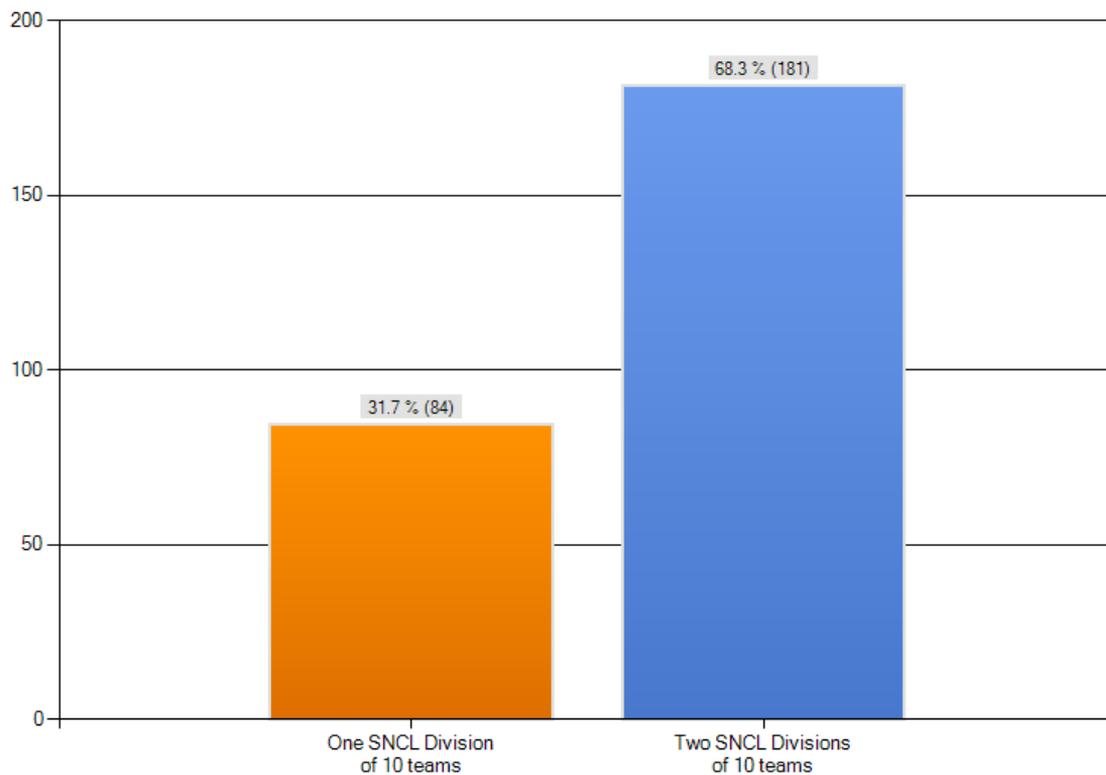


National League or Regional Leagues – Summary of Findings

The above tables show that a narrow majority of current players who responded to the survey (56% - 44%) favour the retention of a national league. When filtered the results also show that an even greater majority of the current premier ship players who responded (72% - 28%) favour the retention of the national league. In contrast the Championship players who responded showed a clear majority (65% - 35%) in favour of establishing regional premier leagues.

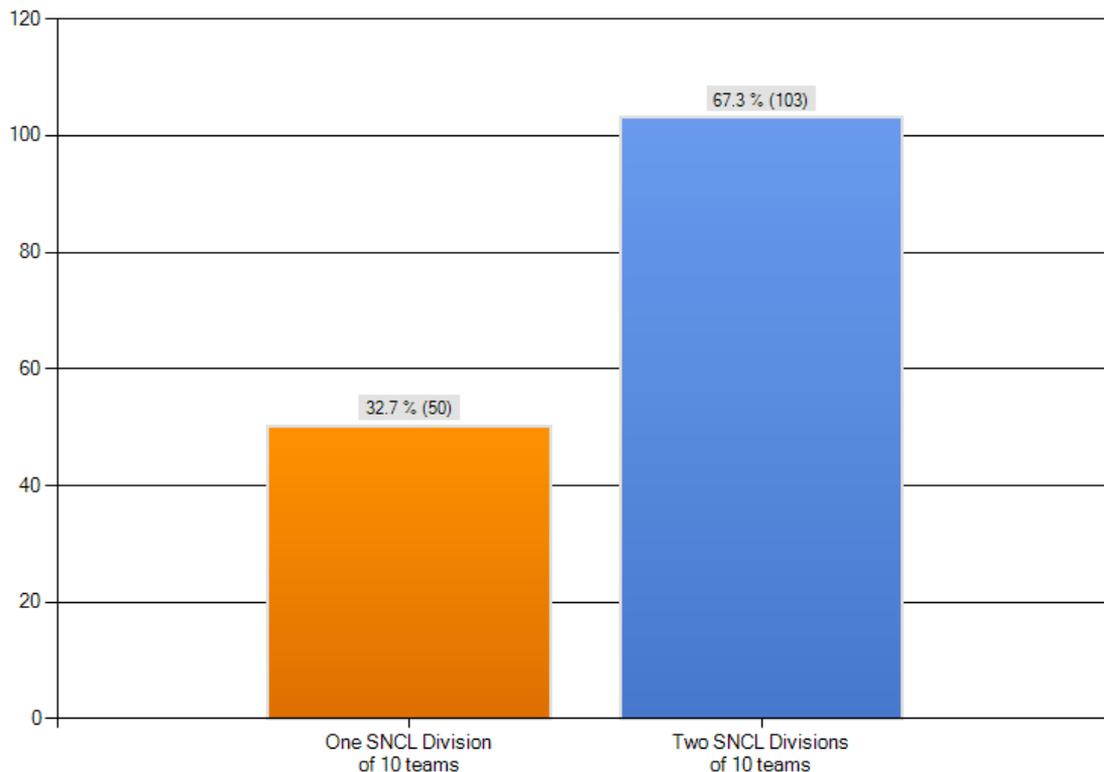
One Division or Two Division National League – All Respondents

If the SNCL was retained which structure would you prefer?



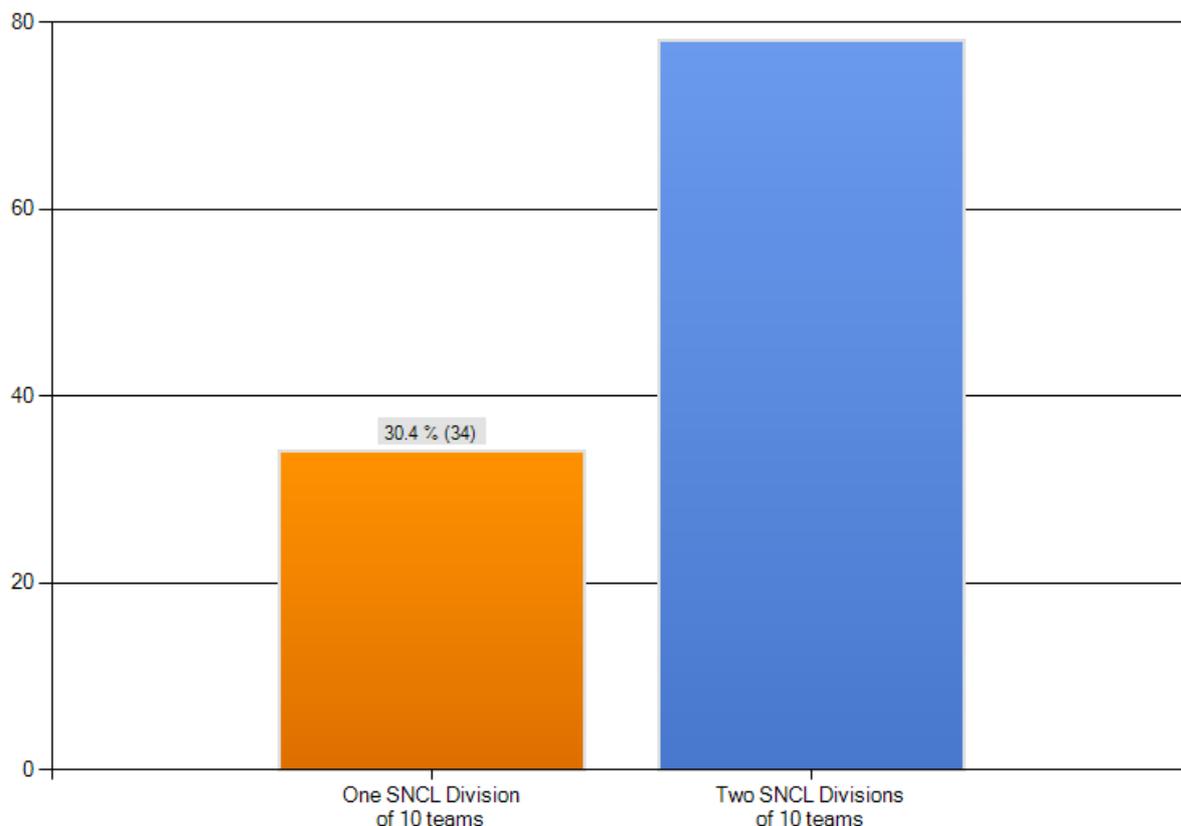
One Division or Two Division National League – Premiership Players only

If the SNCL was retained which structure would you prefer?



One Division or Two Division National League – Championship Players only

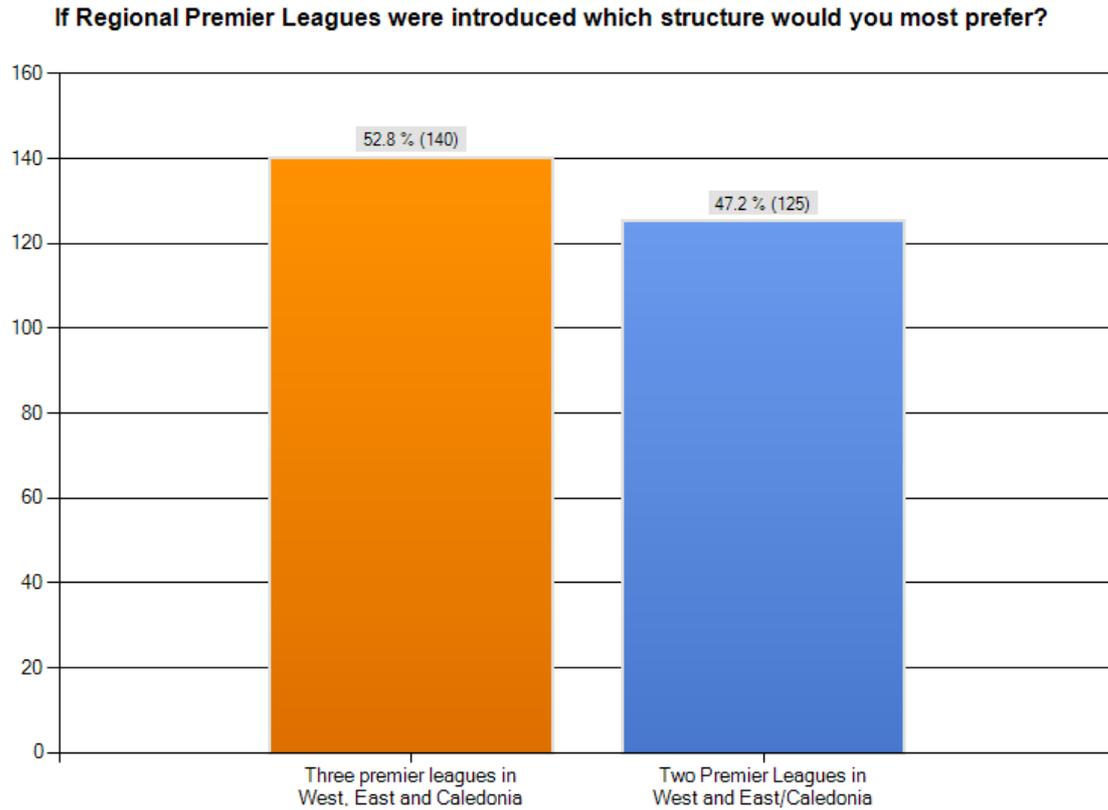
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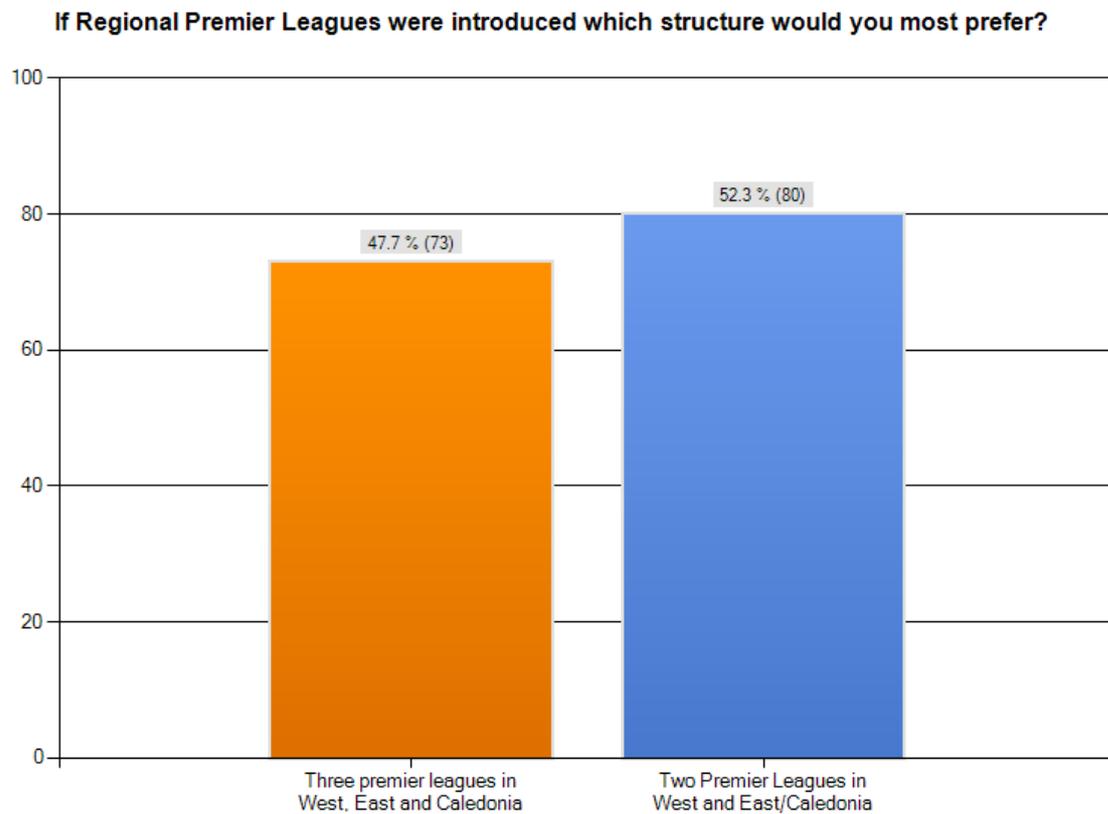
One Division or Two Division National League – Summary of Findings

In contrast to the previous three tables, which showed a sizeable difference in opinion between Premiership and Championship players, there is a clear consensus favouring two divisions rather than one division (68% - 32%) if the SNCL is to be retained. When the results were filtered it showed 67% of Premiership players in favour of the two division format and just under 70% of Championship players favouring two divisions.

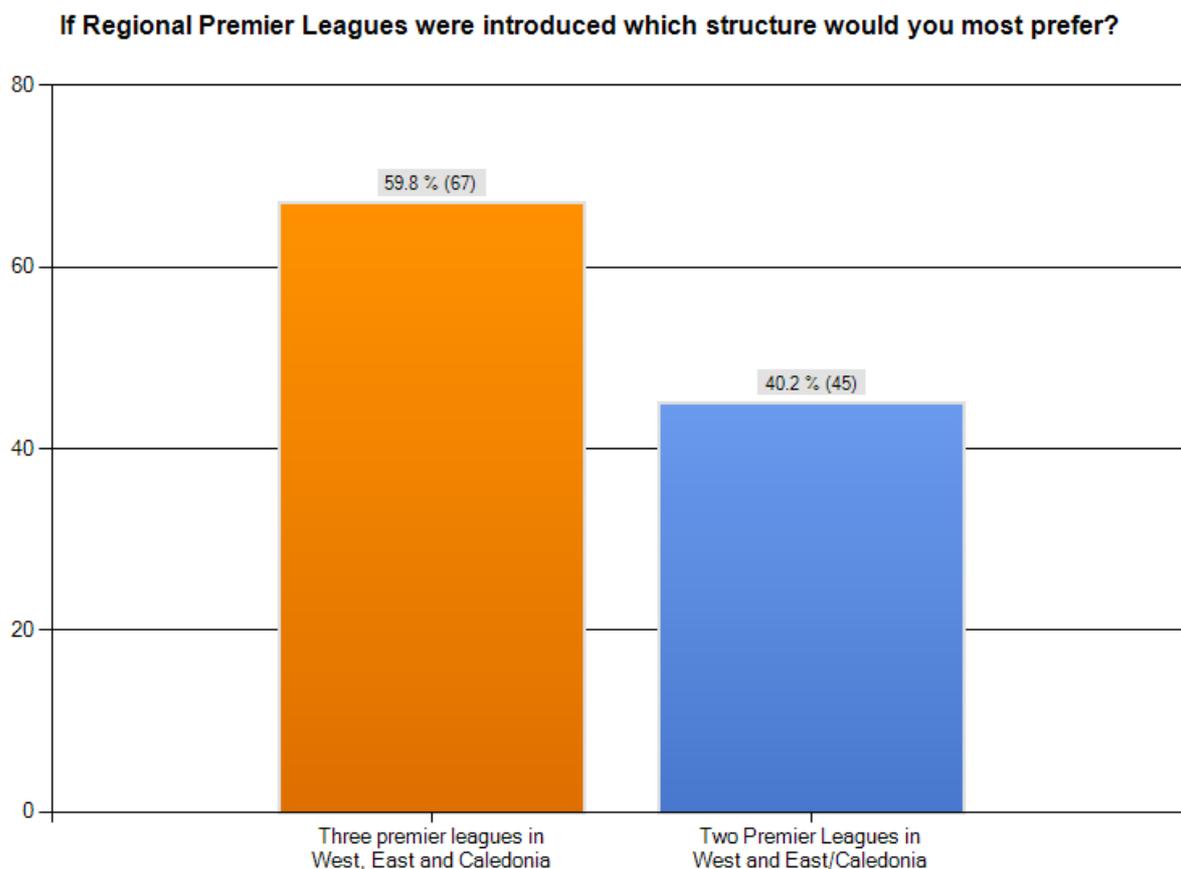
Three Regional Leagues or Two – All Respondents



Three Regional Leagues or Two – Premiership Players only



Three Regional Leagues or Two – Championship Players only



Three Regional Leagues or Two – Summary of Findings

The tables above show a narrow majority of players favour three regional leagues as opposed to two (53% - 47%). Again, however there is a noticeable difference in responses between Premiership and Championship players. While Premiership players narrowly favour the two division format (52% - 48%) the Championship players support the three division format by a clear margin (60% - 40%).

SNCL Player Survey – Additional Information

Other findings from the player survey will be used to assist clubs and to help inform decisions made in relation to future competition structures. For example, the current start time for SNCL matches of 1pm is the least popular choice with 12 noon being the preferred start time for 50% of the respondents. All findings will be considered and any required changes will be made once the new league format for 2012 is decided.

- **Consultation and Future Structures**

Given the varied composition of the Future Structures Group and the breadth of the consultation, it has become clear that no consensus is likely to emerge on the best way forward for the domestic game. Both within the group - and in the wider cricketing community - there was a clear divide between those who wish to retain a national league in some form and those who favour the formation of a more localised competition structure integrated into the existing regional leagues. There are many different permutations and opinions on the best way for each of these solutions to be implemented. It is also clear that, if no compromise solution could be found then the job of the Future Structures Group will be to establish the most appropriate national and regional league formats and to present options to the clubs for discussion and, ultimately, determination of the best way forward. The options preferred by the group and the rationale for those choices - are as follows

Option 1 - To retain the SNCL and reduce the number of teams from thirty two to twenty, with teams competing in two divisions of ten.

Feedback from the wider cricketing community strongly suggests that, ideally, divisions should be of ten teams playing each other on a home and away basis. The FSG is clear in its belief that there are not currently thirty two clubs with the required standard of players, junior development programmes, coaching structures and facilities to merit inclusion in a high quality national league. As a result, returning to three divisions of ten is not deemed to be desirable.

Much of the evidence to support this belief is subjective; however significant credible feedback has been received on the alarming fall in playing standards in recent times. In addition to this, it is clear that some clubs are falling short on the facilities criteria that are clearly stated in the SNCL Handbook. More worryingly however, is the feedback from the Cricket Scotland Development Team on the quality of junior development programmes being run by many clubs. While a significant number of SNCL clubs run high quality junior programmes, it is clear that many other clubs struggle to meet their obligations to junior development. These clubs may appear on paper to meet minimum entry criteria, but are not running programmes of a sufficient quality to sustain their club in the long term.

The survey appears to bear out the need for effective junior development programmes and the need for a steady flow of young talent to maintain standards. There was a significant difference in the age demographic of the Premiership and Championship players who responded to the survey. While 45% of Premiership players who responded are aged 25 or under, only 30% of Championship players are in the same age bracket. Championship teams also have twice as many players (17%) who are over 40. Further evidence of ineffective junior programmes includes examples of SNCL clubs not fulfilling fixtures in national junior cup competitions; while many of the sixteen clubs who applied for Club Coach funding from Cricket Scotland have failed to meet agreed performance criteria for the award.

While the evidence points to a reduced number of teams able to operate at a level appropriate for national league cricket, it is felt that moving to one division of ten may effectively create a ten team super league. It is felt this may also create too wide a gulf in standard between the single premier league and three feeder leagues. It is also clear that

this structure may further accelerate the migration of players to the top ten, heightening the drain of resources on all but the very best clubs. This is neither deemed desirable nor likely to aid the broader development of the game in Scotland. Consequently, the Group feels - on balance - that, if the SNCL is to be retained then two divisions of ten teams would be the optimal number.

If retention of the SNCL is to be the preferred option, the practicality of moving from the current league format to two divisions of ten teams can be facilitated in one of two ways and the Group will accept feedback from clubs to determine the most appropriate method of rationalising the number of teams. The two available options are -

Immediate Reduction - by taking the top twenty placed teams in the 2011 SNCL who “strictly” meet the current league entry criteria and placing them in two divisions of ten for the 2012 season

Managed Reduction – achieved through a qualifying season in 2012 which will reduce the number of teams in the SNCL from thirty two to twenty, while giving all participating clubs the opportunity to make the top twenty for 2013.

Option 2 – To establish three new Regional Premier Leagues that will be integrated into the existing WDCU, ESCA and S&PU structures and operated in partnership with Cricket Scotland.

Establishing three regional leagues in the West, East and Caledonia integrated into the WDCU, ESCA and S&PU, would in many ways, be the most obvious choice for a regionalised league structure. The case for this structure is further strengthened by the regional performance programmes at both junior and senior level which are an integral part of the Cricket Scotland player pathway. This structure would be relatively easy to implement in the west, as they currently have thirteen teams in the SNCL. Concerns however, have been expressed about the merits of this structure; particularly by the teams who are currently the strongest in the East and Caledonia. The principal concern is that a premier league in either region may not currently provide the appropriate level of competition for either the strongest or weakest teams participating. This is principally due to the fact that fewer clubs in each region are currently playing at SNCL standard. This however, can be overcome in the short term by operating smaller divisions of eight teams

- Three Regional Premier Leagues will be established in 2012 in the West, East and Caledonia.
- Each Regional Premier League will consist of between eight and ten teams. With any additional SNCL teams being integrated into the top of the existing feeder league structure in the appropriate region
- The Regional Premier Leagues will be run by the WDCU in the West, ESCA in the East and S&PU in Caledonia. The leagues will be run in partnership with Cricket Scotland via a Memorandum of Understanding.
- Each Premier League will operate under identical entry criteria, playing conditions and league rules as agreed in partnership with Cricket Scotland’s Domestic Cricket Committee.
- Play offs will be held in early September between the winners of the Western, Eastern and Caledonian Premier Leagues to decide the National Club Champion.

Option 3 – To establish two new Regional Premier Leagues, one in the West which would be integrated into the existing WDCU structure and the other in the East which would be administered by a joint ESCA / S&PU Premier League Management Group in partnership with Cricket Scotland and integrated into the two existing league structures below Premier League level.

- Two Regional Premier Leagues will be established in 2012 in the West and East of the country
- Each Regional Premier League will consist of one Divisions of ten teams, unless agreed otherwise by the relevant league association and Cricket Scotland
- The Regional Premier Leagues will be run by the WDCU in the West and subject to agreement, by a combination of ESCA and the S&PU in the East. The leagues will be run in partnership with Cricket Scotland via a Memorandum of Understanding.
- Each Premier League will operate under identical entry criteria, playing conditions and league rules as agreed in partnership with Cricket Scotland’s Domestic Cricket Committee
- A “Grand Final” will be held in early September between the winners of Western Premier and Eastern Premier League to decide the National Club Champion.

WDCU Western Premier League

- The Western Premier League for 2012 will consist of the ten best placed WDCU affiliated clubs teams in the 2011 SNCL. The remaining WDCU affiliated clubs will be integrated into the existing WDCU Premiership in 2012.
- The Western Premier League will consist of one division of ten teams and will be integrated into the existing WDCU League structure through an agreed system of promotion and relegation. This would be subject to any promoted club meeting Regional Premier League criteria.

ESCA / S&PU Eastern Premier League

- The Eastern Premier League for 2012 will consist of the ten best placed teams affiliated to ESCA or the S&PU in the 2011 SNCL. The remaining ESCA and S&PU clubs in the SNCL will be integrated into the appropriate regional league structure.
- The Eastern Premier League will consist of one division of ten teams and will be integrated into the existing ESCA and S&PU structure through an agreed system of promotion and relegation. This would be subject to any promoted club meeting Regional Premier League criteria.

FSG Recommendation 3: Three regional consultation meetings are to be held in September with all SNCL clubs strongly advised to attend. Following feedback from the clubs at the consultation meetings, the number of available options will be reduced from three to two, whereupon a meeting of all SNCL clubs will be held in early October to decide the preferred future option.

The three current options are as follows -

1. To retain the SNCL and reduce the number of teams from thirty two to twenty, with teams competing in two divisions of ten.
2. To establish three new Regional Premier Leagues that will be integrated into the existing WDCU, ESCA and S&PU structures and operated in partnership with Cricket Scotland.
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• **Feedback from League Associations**

Three regional league associations were represented on the Future Structures Group during the consultation process and all three League Management Committees have been consulted on the options being considered.

The South of Scotland Cricket Association (Border League), who currently have the option to nominate their league winner for the SNCL play offs, were not directly asked for feedback during the consultation process. While the existence of the Border League remains an important part of the League landscape in Scotland, it is felt that the operation of the league would not be directly affected unless the current SNCL play off system is changed or becomes irrelevant in any new structure. Discussions will take place between the Cricket Scotland Domestic Cricket Committee and representatives of the South of Scotland Cricket Association (Border League), The Aberdeenshire Cricket Association (Aberdeenshire Grades) and the North of Scotland Cricket Association (NoSCA) following any decision on league reconstruction.

The three major feeder leagues were asked to contribute a position statement to be included in the report and are as follows –

Statement on behalf of the East of Scotland Cricket Association

The Future Structures Group's proposed options on the restructuring or ending of the national leagues are broadly supported by the committee of the East of Scotland Association. ESCA feel strongly that the option to retain a national league, which would consist of two divisions of ten clubs, is our preferred option. This option would, however, mean a number of clubs currently in the national leagues joining the current East League structure.

The alternative - to revert to district leagues in the East, West and North of Scotland - is one which we feel we could support and administer if that is what clubs decide. However, in the event that district leagues are the adopted option then ESCA would reserve the right to hold discussions with clubs in the North district with a view to forming a joint East/North Premier Division.

ESCA consider that the two options to be put to national league clubs are the best of the options discussed by the FSG. However, the strongly preferred option is that which proposes a national league consisting of two divisions of ten clubs

Statement on behalf of the WDCU:

The WDCU fully supports the Cricket Scotland Future Structures Group and welcomes the dialogue that has taken place within it in relation to the organisation of domestic club cricket.

The options proposed by the Future Structures Group on the immediate future of the Scottish National Cricket League are to reduce the SNCL to two divisions of ten teams or to revert to fully regionalised club cricket under the auspices of the WDCU, SP&U and ESCA.

After initial consultation with those WDCU clubs currently represented in SNCL, the WDCU Executive consider that full regionalisation, in conjunction with an expanded domestic representative competition, end-of-season inter-league play-offs to determine a national champion, and continuation of both national cup competitions, best represents the preferred option of a clear majority of these clubs, and is also the preferred option of a clear majority of the WDCU Executive determining it to provide the greatest good for the greatest number over the longest period of time.

However, the operational aspects of a return of any team to the WDCU resulting from either option being adopted can be facilitated within the structure introduced by the WDCU in 2011 which provides a framework aimed at strengthening and developing all WDCU clubs, meeting their aspirations and continually providing support for facilities and other improvement.

The WDCU will convene a meeting of all member clubs to decide which option is the preferred option of its member clubs as a whole.

Statement on behalf of the Strathmore & Perthshire Union

The Strathmore and Perthshire Union (S&PU) has been represented on the Future Structures Group by Bob McFarlane current President of Cricket Scotland who is also a member of the Union Committee.

The Committee of the S&PU has been fully appraised of the work of the Futures Group and have been consulted with regard to potential options moving forward.

The Union Committee are in favour of supporting a National League Structure consisting of 2 Divisions of 10 Teams.

This is seen as the most acceptable way forward as it is felt that moving to a completely Regional structure would weaken cricket in the area. This is due to the vast difference in standard of sides currently playing in the SNCL compared to those in the Premier Division of the S&PU. We feel there could potentially be a lot of mismatched games in any new "Caledonian" Premier Division

It was acknowledged by the S&PU Committee that due to the flexibility of approach within the current Union rules, we would be able to cope with whatever format may be adopted; but our preference is firmly placed towards the creation of two Divisions of National League with a Regional Structure below supporting this format

- **Cricket Scotland Policy**

The Group was fully appraised of Cricket Scotland's vision and strategy for the domestic game and as a result it is hoped that the Future Structures Group has been able to properly consider all options and provide a "joined up" solution to future domestic structures. For the avoidance of doubt, Cricket Scotland has provided the following statement

Cricket Scotland Position statement on League Reconstruction

Cricket Scotland has been consistent in our position throughout the last six years of debate on the potential restructuring of senior league cricket in Scotland. Our position is as follows;

- *Cricket Scotland has promoted the merits of a regional structure for our senior clubs in recent years and will continue to do so. We believe the primary objectives for Scotland's premier clubs should be;*
 1. *To increase participation numbers locally by providing more and better opportunities for players of all ages to play and remain involved in club cricket at all levels*
 2. *To raise the general standard of play by improving facilities and building sustainable coaching structures.*
- *We believe a network of strong regional premier leagues, integrated into existing league structures and supporting an expanded Regional Series is the best way forward for domestic cricket in Scotland. The leagues would work in partnership with Cricket Scotland to develop consistent criteria and playing conditions; and would culminate with play offs to decide the national champion club.*

We believe that the SNCL is no longer fit for purpose for the following reasons -

- *SNCL Objective (a) states that the aim of the league is to "improve the standards of the top Scottish players and the performances of the Scottish national team." Cricket Scotland strongly believes the SNCL does not achieve this aim.*
 - *In the past decade the pathway for international cricketers has changed considerably with the establishment of regional and national academies, the regional series and the Scotland Lions programmes. It is principally through these programmes and competitions, rather than the SNCL, that Cricket Scotland will identify, select and develop Scottish international cricketers and teams.*
 - *The gulf in standard between SNCL club and international cricket continues to widen. The National Selection Panel has stated that performances by players in club cricket are now used only as a guide to form rather than a basis for selection. The top level of domestic club cricket will however continue to form a basis for selection for players aspiring to play regional cricket.*
- *Cricket Scotland continues to be concerned that the current SNCL structure encourages clubs to divert resources away from key functions, such as the development of facilities, junior sections and sustainable coaching structures. Many*

clubs embark on unsustainable short term “quick fix” strategies aimed at “success” or “survival”. It is clear that many clubs have prioritised their 1st XI in recent times, focusing on recruitment rather than development, and have not embraced the concept of “whole club development”

- *It is clear that travel is increasingly becoming a barrier to participation in what is an amateur sport at club level. Social change has made many players more time precious and cricket is not immune to this. Club cricket must adapt to social change if it is to survive in the modern era.*
- *Cricket Scotland continues to express concern at the falling standard of play in the majority of SNCL matches. There has undoubtedly been an accelerated migration of players to the top clubs but this would appear to be to the detriment of the majority. Given the prevailing structure, this raises further concerns over the suitability of a 32 team “national” league.*

Cricket Scotland would ask clubs to carefully consider their long term priorities before deciding on the best league structure for Scottish cricket

Cricket Scotland August 2011

• **Summary of Recommendations**

FSG Recommendation 1: The 16 team league format with late season split should not be considered moving forward and that a new format should be introduced in 2012

FSG Recommendation 2: The number of teams in any future National League should be reduced to ensure that a higher minimum standard of play prevails. This will in turn protect the integrity of the league. In addition enhanced development and facilities criteria, which are more easily measured, should be introduced and strictly enforced to improve standards.

FSG Recommendation 3: Three regional consultation meetings should be held in September with all SNCL clubs strongly advised to attend. Following feedback from the clubs at the consultation meetings, the number of available options will be reduced from three to two, whereupon a meeting of all SNCL clubs will be held in early October to decide the preferred future option.

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3. To establish two new Regional Premier Leagues, one in the West which would be integrated into the existing WDCU structure and the other in the East which would be administered by a joint ESCA / S&PU Premier League Management Group in partnership with Cricket Scotland and integrated into the two existing league structures below Premier League level.