

## Area Masters Representation Eligibility 2024 Onwards

The aim of this paper is to set out the rationale and propose the criteria for player eligibility for the England Hockey Area Masters Tournaments 2024 onwards, and the process for any player exemption requests.

### Overview

September 2021 saw a change in the management structure of all hockey in England from five Regions to eight Areas. For the new Area Masters Tournaments, if all Areas were to put out teams at all ages, many more teams would be needed and therefore, many more players. For example, the number of teams would need to double in the north of England where the region was split in two, and triple in the south, where the region was split into three. Furthermore, this change affected the representation of players for the new Area teams. How would we establish who played for which Area?

The representative goal posts shifted so evolution was necessary. With boundaries now around Areas, there needed to be a shift from the old regional eligibility, which included where you were born and/or where you live or play, to a new set of criteria for Area representation. Areas are made up of the clubs that affiliate to them. As the location of a club is generally a constant within an Area, it was agreed that the masters eligibility would be based on a player's club and the Area that club affiliates to. This in turn was based on the adult section of clubs playing in Area leagues.

Implementing this change would be a big task, so transition could potentially take 3-5 years. Over the transition period, the criteria would need to be fairly loose initially and then tighten over time to provide clarity.

### **2022**

The first tournaments in 2022 included several criteria in a general rank order. The aim was to transition players to the new system, ensure players had time to understand and adapt to the changes and get as many teams out as possible.

- i) *Shall reach the qualifying age for a competition within the year of the competition.*
- ii) *Shall primarily be a bona fide member of a club in the Area they are representing.*
- iii) *May qualify by being a resident in the Area they are representing, particularly if not a member of a club. Other possible exceptions see below.*
- iv) *Shall only be eligible to represent one Area in a given year.*
- v) *Shall only be eligible to play in one age group competition each year.*

*Where point iv) or v) may threaten the entry of an Area team into a competition, that Area should make representation to the 8 Area Masters group (contact details to follow) for a waiver at least two months in advance of the first tournaments in which the individual intends to play.*

*If a player wishes to represent an Area on the basis that they live in an Area, previously played for that area (or region) and have relocated or were born in that Area, then a request should be put to the 8 Area Masters Group (contact details to follow) with said details and proof. A log of approved exceptions will be maintained.*

*Should that request be granted, the player must play for that Area for a minimum of 3 years.*

Affiliation was based on adult league teams playing in an Area. Masters leagues were not included in the criteria as generally only London delivers regular masters leagues and those leagues comprised teams from other Areas. For example, a player who played for Reading in the London Hockey Masters Leagues should play for South Central as that's where Reading is located, its adult teams all play in South Central and so it affiliates to that Area. If that player played for London, it would mean that all players who played in the London Masters Leagues could represent London. If so, London would be dominated by too many players. This would be to the detriment of other Areas and to the tournaments themselves.

Where a club was considered a 'border' club with adult teams in leagues across two Areas, players could choose which Area they played for.

Areas were able to get teams out in most age groups, but not all. Some Areas were not represented at certain age groups at all and there were a number of combined teams from the North West and Yorkshire and the North East, and from South Central and South East. Most players played for the correct Area accepting the criteria, with some making an early change where necessary after discussions with Area leads. There were still a lot of players playing for the wrong Area, but the goal was to get teams out.

Requests were heard if a player had previously played for a different Area (from old Region), or were born in an Area. These were generally agreed to as part of the initial settling down process. There was particular flexibility around GKs to ensure all teams had a player in goal.

## **2023**

In the second year of the tournaments, it was agreed by the 8 Area Masters Committee that Area teams should indeed represent the clubs in their Area so a tightening up of the eligibility criteria was needed to ensure all understood the principles of the tournaments and the aim to ease more players into the correct Area. In February 2023 the criteria were updated, and the club became the primary eligibility criteria. Where a player lived was only considered if a player had no club. This was a conscious move away from the old regional criteria of birth etc. which were generally dropped, although some exemptions were still be allowed on request.

Essentially, the following criteria were adopted

- *Qualifying age in 5-year groups*
- *Club in Area representing*
- *Where player lives, particularly if no club*
- *One Area in a given year*
- *One age group competition per year. Two for top end age groups.*

*Movement of Areas should ideally only be around changing clubs. However, at this time a player may still request to represent an Area on the basis that they*

- *Previously played for an Area (or region)*
- *Have relocated*
- *Were born in that Area*

It was important to ensure all younger players up to and including the 60s, generally played for the correct Area. However, for the 65s and over, where there are fewer players, there would be greater tolerance. The focus was still about getting teams out to play, and more teams were fielded than in 2022.

A dedicated process was set up for any requests to play for a different Area. It was agreed that Area masters leads would make an exemption request on behalf of their player via an online form. Knowing the criteria, and managing their squads, it was believed leads would be able to discuss any requests in the first instance with their team managers and players to reduce the number of requests.

Sara Walker was tasked to assess and manage the exemption requests on behalf of the 8A Masters group and make decisions based on the criteria stated. Elaina Leithead on behalf of England Hockey transferred the request outcomes to the Masters forum for Area leads to see and share with their player/team manager.

Of the approximately 1,800 - 2,000 players involved in all the tournaments,

-139 requests to move Area or age group (6.96%) were made via the online form, though more emergency phone call/email requests were received in the week and 24hrs before a tournament began.

- 27 people were initially turned down (20% of the 7%, or 1% overall)

- 15 (of the 27) 'challenged' the decision and were cleared to play for the Area they wanted once more information on each case was received.

- 12 people were turned down (0.6% overall). They were largely under 60 as the aim was to start getting the younger age groups playing in the right Area.

Requests were agreed for one year, as the criteria would likely evolve further for 2024 and onwards. Discussions with team leads and players directly proved very useful in helping everyone understand the criteria and where they were leading.

It's clear that the vast majority of players (99.4%), have settled into the new Area representation but some management of exceptions is still necessary.

## **2024**

This brings us to the tournaments for 2024 and onwards. It has been agreed by the 8 Area Masters committee and it's appointed sub-group working on these eligibility criteria, that the aims and principles of the Area Tournaments remain sound.

### **Aims and Principles**

The aim of the Area Masters Tournaments is to be fun, enjoyable, competitive and engage as many participants as possible. Masters hockey is about playing with friends, having fun and socialising.

The principle of the Area Masters Tournaments is that teams entering should be representative of the clubs which affiliate to an Area.

After 5 years of the tournaments following the change from Regions to Areas, in 2027 all players will be expected to play for the correct Area, unless by exception.

### **Definitions**

What then defines an Area and a club within it, and how do we manage players that don't fit exactly into this model?

An Area is that set down in the new governance structure by England Hockey. England is divided geographically into eight Areas and each Area is comprised of a number of clubs.

A club, or group of people with a common cause in playing hockey and an affiliated body, can include adults, juniors and masters players.

However, not all clubs have junior or masters teams. The common element is the adult teams that enter the adult Saturday (generally) leagues which may include players of all ages. These adult teams play in leagues managed by the Areas. Clubs then pay an affiliation and league fee to their Area. This then defines which clubs affiliate to which Area and will be adopted for these criteria.

County masters teams that enter the older age group England Hockey knockout competitions are not included as clubs for Area masters representation. Any player in such a county team must use their regular home Saturday league club for representation.

One or two Areas go across county boundaries. Might counties be considered as defining Areas? If old county boundaries were included in the model, it would only serve to conflict the model. The new boundaries are clear and have been accepted by the vast majority of players. There are approximately 50 counties across the country, therefore a huge number of borders and so a vast number of players would be conflicted as to which Area to play for. The new model of Area club affiliation keeps the number of conflicted players to a minimum.

### **Exceptions**

Within any model there should be tolerance. In this scenario with a change to a new set of criteria, clearly it is important for player inclusion, but how far should that tolerance stretch? It is very important that the integrity of the tournaments, and the aims and principles they are based on, are upheld for all to agree to their legitimacy. Only 12 of 139 players were refused an exception in 2023, showing that the tolerance was high.

If club affiliation is the key eligibility criteria moving forward, some degree of tolerance in the model leaves anything outside this as an exception.

### **Border clubs**

What then of the 'border' clubs? Clubs that sit geographically on the edge of two Area borders have some teams that play in one Area's leagues and other teams that play in an adjacent Area's leagues. This can be a spilt across men's and women's sections of a club, or within genders. Affiliation fees are paid to one Area, but league fees are paid to two Areas. The number of such border clubs is 15/802 or 1.9%. As there is no full allegiance to one Area or another, players in these few 'border' clubs should be able to choose which Area they play for.

To clearly define which clubs are in which Area and which are 'border' clubs, England Hockey will provide a list of all clubs that will declare Area affiliation. This list should be made available to everyone. This will ensure all players are clear on which Area trials they should attend from the beginning of the masters selection process.

### **Tolerance – Ride out an age group**

Each Area should work to ensure players are playing for the correct Area as soon as possible, based on these criteria. It is hoped that all Areas will field their own teams in all age groups over the next few years. To help Areas where there may be a dearth of players in a particular age group, some tolerance will be given to help get teams out. This tolerance will be reduced over time as we get stricter and move towards all players playing for the correct Area in 2027.

A player may be able to 'ride out' an age group. When they move up an age group, they must change to the correct Area, if they have not done so already.

- If a player has 3 years left to play in an age group, the exception can be till 2026 but they must move by 2027.
- If a player has 2 years left to play in an age group, they must move by 2026.
- If a player has 1 year left to play in an age group, they must move by 2025.

This will not be the norm and will be given by exception only to support getting teams out, and only where an Area can demonstrate low numbers in an age group.

### **Goal keepers**

Like any other player, GKs will be expected to follow these criteria, but some flexibility will be extended towards them to ensure teams have a GK.

### **Top end age**

There are fewer players at the top of the age groups, particularly for the men as their age groups go up to 75, compared to the women who are at 65, currently. To date, it has proven difficult to field teams at the top end age groups across all Areas. In addition, there has been some resistance to the changes, particularly some 65+ men who have strong allegiances to the old regional system. Whilst this is understandable, it is important that we continue to strive towards the new system accepted by the vast majority.

For these top end groups there should be continued tolerance for a further 3 years to a point where, after 5 years of the new model from 2022 to 2026, Areas have sound representative teams in 2027. By this time all players will have had a significant period to adjust to the new Areas. In the meantime, each Area should strive, year by year, to meet this target, so hopefully the number of teams will continue to increase each year. Hopefully players will stay in the game, so things should get easier over time as more players move into these older groups with a clear understanding of their allegiance.

Where should this top end be set? This year, in the 2023 tournaments, all 8 Areas fielded a women's O60 team and there were 6/8 women's O65 teams. The men also fielded 8/8 teams at O60, but 7/8 at O65, 5/8 at O70 and 5/8 at O75.

This suggests the tolerance should be set at over 65 and above for men. Several of the WO60 teams included players over 65 and even over 70, therefore the tolerance for the women's teams should be set at 60.

## **Play a second tournament**

Where a team is low on numbers (13 or fewer), players in the age group above may be able to play a second tournament. This should not be to deliberately boost the quality of the team.

## **Temporary working**

Some players work in, or are posted temporarily to, a different Area to their home, such as members of the UK Armed Forces. Such players may join a local club but wish to play for their home Area. If a player continually plays for a club outside their home Area, it is fair to say that they should represent that Area. However, such cases are very individual and should be considered as exceptions and dealt with on a case-by-case basis by request.

## **Summary**

**This section to form the basis of the eligibility criteria document to be shared widely and placed on websites with the clubs list.**

**See Appendix 1. for the document to be posted.**

To conclude, the vast number of players are happily settled into Area representation following the change from regions. The number of exceptions to this is very low and will always need managing.

To ensure clarity on the eligibility criteria, what can be considered as an exception and the process for exception requests the following aims, principles, criteria, and process for exception requests are proposed going forward.

## **Aims**

Area Masters Tournaments should be fun, enjoyable and competitive and aim to engage as many participants as possible.

## **Principles**

Participation in the Area Masters Tournaments are for teams that represent the clubs in Areas.

## **Eligibility Criteria 2024, 2025, 2026**

It is proposed that the following Area masters player eligibility criteria for 2024-2026 be adopted with reduced tolerance across the next three years.

- Qualifying age in 5-year groups from age 35 upwards for men and women, where 1<sup>st</sup> January – 31<sup>st</sup> December represents a given qualifying year
- Bona fide member of a club affiliated to Area representing
- If no club, where a player lives
- One Area
- One age group competition per year. Two for top end age groups (WO65 and MO75)

Anything outside the club criteria should be considered as an exception.

Tolerance or the number of exceptions to be significantly reduced from 2024-2026.

Club affiliation is defined as the adult membership affiliation to Areas via leagues as set down by England Hockey. A list of clubs affiliated to each Area will be provided.

## **Exceptions**

- Border club players
- Top age group players. Men O75 and women O65 can play 2 tournaments
- Temporary working situations
- Tolerance. 'Ride out' an age group. Flexibility for GKs. Play a second tournament

Requests for exceptions to the criteria will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Agreed exceptions will be for one year as the criteria tighten towards 2026 and further.

Should a player move Area, this will be for a minimum of 3 years, unless otherwise agreed in exception.

## **Eligibility Criteria 2027 and further**

After a full 5 years of the tournaments, the criteria set out above for 2024 onwards, should be adhered to very closely with a low tolerance, or minimal exception. This will include no exception for top end players to play out of Area.

'Ride out an age group' to be removed.

Should any team fall foul of these criteria, that team may face being disqualified from a tournament or its results set to 0.

## **Exceptions**

- Border club players
- Top age group players. Can play 2 tournaments
- Temporary working situations
- Tolerance. Flexibility for GKs. Play a second tournament

## **Process for Exception Requests**

Requests for exceptions to the criteria will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The process used in 2023 for any exception requests worked well and, therefore should generally be adopted again going forward. More information on player circumstances could be requested to give a clearer picture and reduce further email and phone traffic.

1. Team managers/captains check the eligibility of their players against the England Hockey affiliated clubs list that will be shared with them. This should be done as soon as trials begin.
2. Should a request for change be required, Area masters lead puts in exemption request on behalf of their player via a dedicated on-line form. This can be to request a change of Area or a different team within an Area. This should be done as soon as possible to the start of trials and at least 5 weeks prior to the start date of a player's tournament.
3. Requests will be considered by a subgroup of the 8 Area Masters Committee. The subgroup will be led by the by the Chair of the Masters Committee. Where a request is considered for one of the subgroups' own Area, that subgroup member will stand down.
4. Requests will be considered in accordance with the eligibility criteria and with a view to tightening these criteria across time but with degrees of tolerance to allow teams to be fielded.
5. The outcome of the request will be posted on the Area leads' forum for transparency.
6. Area leads to inform their team manager and/or player of the request outcome.

The England Hockey club list will define which clubs affiliate to which Areas and which clubs will be considered as 'border' clubs.

Appeals should be made as soon as possible following the posting of a request outcome and at least 5 weeks prior to the start date of a player's tournament. Any appeal against the outcome of the request will be heard by England Hockey and the Chair of the Masters Committee.

It is the responsibility of Area masters leads and their age group team leads to ensure all players are eligible to represent their Area and processes are followed in good time. This will allow team sheets to be sent to tournament organisers at least 2 weeks before the start of a tournament, in accordance with the tournament regulations.

## **Timeline**

Once confirmed, the eligibility criteria will be shared widely and particularly with all team managers for players and posted on the England Hockey website, the England Hockey Masters website and each individual Area website by the end of October 2023.

Area Masters Committee  
25<sup>th</sup> September 2023

## Appendix 1.

### Area Masters Representation Eligibility

The following criteria should be used when selecting players for Area Masters squads.

The intention of these principles is to ensure Area teams are based on players who play for the clubs in their Area.

#### Eligibility Criteria 2024, 2025, 2026

##### **Players**

- Shall reach the qualifying age, in 5-year groups from age 35 upwards, within the year of competition
- Shall primarily be a bona fide member of a club affiliated to the Area they are representing
- If no club, may qualify on residential grounds
- Shall only represent one Area, in a given year
- Shall only play in one age competition per year

Anything outside the club criteria should be considered as an exception.

Tolerance, or the number of exceptions, to be significantly reduced from 2024-2026.

Club affiliation is defined as the adult membership affiliation to Areas via leagues as set down by England Hockey. A list of clubs affiliated to each Area will be provided.

The year of competition shall be 1<sup>st</sup> January – 31<sup>st</sup> December.

##### **Exceptions**

- Border club players
- Top age group players
- Temporary working situations
- Ride out an age group
- Flexibility for GKs
- Play a second tournament

Requests for exceptions will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Agreed exceptions will be for one year, unless stated otherwise, as the criteria tighten towards 2026.

Should a player move Area, this will be for a minimum of 3 years, unless otherwise agreed in exception.

##### **Notes**

**Border clubs:** *These clubs border two Areas and are listed in the EH list of club affiliations to Areas. Any player in a border club will be able to choose which Area they play for.*

**Top age group players:** *Men O75 and women O65 may play 2 tournaments if required. They can play down an age group, in addition to their own, to make up a team where that team may have 13 or fewer players. This should not be at the expense of other eligible players in the age group below.*

**Temporary working situations:** *Working and playing temporarily in a different Area to home, such as members of the UK Armed Forces. If a player continually plays for a club outside their home Area, they should represent that, Area.*

**Ride out an age group:** *Where a team has low numbers, a player may be able to remain in an Area but must move to the correct Area by the time they move up an age group.*

**Flexibility for GKs:** *Some flexibility may be extended towards GKs to ensure teams have a keeper.*

**Play a second tournament:** *Where a team has low numbers (13 or fewer), a player from the age group above may be able to play a second tournament.*



## **Eligibility Criteria 2027 and further**

Following a full 5 years of the tournaments the number of exceptions will be at an absolute minimum.

The criteria for 2027 will be as for 2024-2026 with the following exceptions.

### **Exceptions**

- Border club players
- Top age group players
- Temporary working situations
- Tolerance. Flexibility for GKs. Play a second tournament

There will be no exceptions for

- Top age group players to play out of Area
- Ride out an age group

Should any team fall foul of these criteria, that team may face being disqualified from a tournament or its results set to 0.

### **How to Request an Exemption**

Movement of Areas should ideally only be around changing clubs.

Should a player wish to request an exemption in line with the eligibility criteria, they should

1. Contact their Area masters lead via their team manager
2. Area masters lead will put in an exemption request on behalf of their player via a dedicated on-line form. This can be to request a change of Area or a different team within an Area. This should be done as soon as possible to the start of trials but at least 5 weeks prior to the start date of the player's tournament
3. The outcome of the request will be posted, as soon as possible, on the Area leads' forum for transparency
4. Area leads to inform their team manager and/or player of the request outcome

Requests will be considered by a subgroup of the 8 Area Masters Committee.

Any appeal against an outcome request will be heard by England Hockey and the chair of the Area Masters Committee.

Area Masters Committee September 2023