

EHO West Area AGM

Report to the West Area Officiating Chair

This past season has been both rewarding and challenging, with our West Area umpires officiating at all levels of hockey — from the FIH Pro League to grassroots school matches. Their dedication continues to ensure that our sport thrives week in and week out.

I would like to place on record my thanks to the members of the Area Officiating Committee for their hard work and dedication, often in extremely difficult circumstances, over the last season.

David Lillywhite, along with the Selection Committee and our Assessors and Umpire Coaches have worked hard over the season to recruit and develop our pool of umpires taking neutral appointments at the top level of the Area League and Graham Woolcock, with the goodwill and support of our umpires has had the unenviable task of appointing those umpires – in all, approximately 1,600 neutral umpire appointments across the season. My sincere thanks go to both of them for their hard work.

I'd also like to acknowledge Alison Cook for her tireless efforts in building our Club Cluster Leads network, and Richard Hill for his valuable work on the Technical Officiating front. Where we have had the engagement of the Clubs through their Cluster Leads, the Clusters are working well. Unfortunately, without Club engagement, we are always going to struggle to support our Club-based umpires.

When I took on this role 12 months ago, I was led to believe that a great amount of work had been completed, and systems and processes were in place to lead the development and growth of umpiring in the Area as a beacon of what was possible for other Areas to follow. Sadly, this was not the case.

The Officiating Committee met in August 2024 to agree a plan and priorities for the future. This was focussed on improving and developing in the key areas of communication, providing better support to Club Umpires, reviewing Umpire and Umpire Support Pathways and encouraging Technical Officiating.

Whilst the Officiating Committee is few in number, I think we have actually achieved quite a lot over the last twelve months:

- We now have a database of all umpires, umpire coaches, and assessors in the Area, from which we can generate emails to communicate directly with them. Unfortunately, this is only as good as the source information – GMS and Hockey Hub – but is better than nothing.
- We have reviewed the Umpire and Umpire Coach/Assessor pathways. These have been discussed with EH and our proposals are now part of a wider EHO review. After some consideration, we decided that the creation of a Level 2 Club umpire was not necessary and would merely distract resource for no tangible benefit.
- We have developed, with the support of England Hockey, an Umpire Coach Development Programme, comprising a series of on-line seminars looking at the theoretical aspects of coaching and analysing performance, coupled with some mentor-supported practical coaching sessions. We have run our first cohort as a trial within the West and shall be working with EH and the other Areas to roll this out as a national

programme in 2026. Whilst we recognise this will not be a “quick fix”, we anticipate that increasing the number of trained umpire coaches will be a key factor in improving the standard of Club umpires in the future

- We have set up a network of Club Clusters, recruiting volunteers to act as Club Cluster Leads to support the Club umpire Developers and Club Umpires, and set up the systems and processes to support them through our Club Umpire Development Lead
- We have supported several tournaments and used them as opportunities to provide coaching and assessment for both aspiring Level 2 umpires who are looking to develop their umpiring with neutral appointments in the Area and for Level 1 club umpires, both assessed and unassessed, looking to take advantage of opportunities for coaching input to improve their umpiring.

There are still areas where we need to do more:

- Developing a structure and personnel to identify and nurture young umpires across the Area
- Recruiting, training and developing match officials
- Encouraging more umpires to umpire outside of their own clubs
- Encourage more umpires to umpire Indoor hockey

This has been a challenging season but one which I hope we will look back on as the season where we laid some solid foundations for a brighter future for officiating, with a good structure in place to improve the support being offered to Club Umpires.

I would like to take a moment to reflect on the sad loss of our friend and umpiring colleague, Peter Hammond who passed away at the beginning of April. Pete’s passion was hockey, and in particular umpiring and supporting other umpires through his coaching.

Pete’s passion for hockey — especially umpiring and mentoring others — was evident in everything he did. Originally from Kent, we were fortunate that work brought him to Devon, where he dedicated immense time and energy to supporting both local and national officiating. Throughout his officiating career, Pete was admired and respected within the hockey family. He had a dry sense of humour and kind nature and was totally committed to supporting new umpires in the area. He was always an excellent colleague to have on the other side of the pitch. Although he stopped umpiring last summer after being diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease, he remained an active member of the hockey community and was often seen at the side of the pitch, coaching and supporting colleagues over the course of the last season.

Peter’s funeral will be held tomorrow (7th May) at Exeter Crematorium at 12.30pm, and I hope that the Umpiring Community will be fully represented and, at the request of Pete’s family, wearing their umpiring shirts.

In recognition of Pete’s contribution to Umpiring in the West, we have decided to name the annual Umpire Panel Awards in his name.

On a personal note, I have found this year to be extremely difficult. Whilst West Officiating has made some amazing progress in a number of areas, I do not feel that we have had the support that we could or should have had from the West Board or indeed from Clubs who are only too

willing to complain when things are not right but do not raise their hand to help to improve things or seem to be prepared to consider their wider role in the development of the game.

As a result, I have decided that I shall not be standing for the role of Chair of the Officiating Committee. I wish my whoever picks up the mantle every success in the future and want to reassure them that I remain available to offer guidance and support where needed.

In closing I would like to thank all our members, who week in, week out, pick up a whistle or clipboard in all weathers and allow the game we all love to happen.

Charles Hallows
May 2025