

League and Knockout Evolution 2026 - Information Paper

1. Strategy context

BUCS' three ambitious strategy goals to 2030 are underpinned by four key levers of change – the intent through which annual key performance indicators are set. When reviewing these levers, the significance of competition transformation is stark, with all relating to participant value, and one of the four relating to member value resting in this:

- Participant Value
 - Lever 1: attractive programme - “Ensure the capability of BUCS competition programme to meet the sporting needs of the next generation”
 - Lever 2: respected programme - “Enhance external perceptions of BUCS highest-ranked competitors’ performance levels”
 - Lever 3: high-quality programme - “Provide experiences of an exceptional quality to BUCS participants”
 - Lever 4: diverse and inclusive programme - “Ensure that the BUCS programme meets the needs of the diverse range of students in the UK”
- Member Value
 - Lever 4: high-engaged programme - “Demonstrate the reach of higher education sport and active participation to wider education and sport stakeholders.”

2. Introduction

The league and knockout programme is a central element of our core delivery for both members and students. It provides more than 25,000 fixtures, across 24 sports, for over 5,000 teams, in 825 leagues and 236 knockout leagues annually. It is formed on a historical structure based on our current Nations and Regions infrastructure with some National and Premier leagues that have expanded and grown over time to help accelerate our programmes.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the strategic project that will now propose change to part of our programme and help us and you to continue to deliver for students whilst mitigating some of the current and future risks we all carry. This project is called the **League and Knockout Evolution 2026 (L&KE)**

Following the implementation of the New Sports Framework along with the annual Event Review, we are now enabled to flexibly introduce and remove (if necessary) new sports and disciplines and challenge the quality of delivery; an especially important change with respect to those events delivered by third parties. It is now pertinent we look to adapt the way we deliver the league and knockout programme.

3. Situational Analysis / Why now

In summer 2024 the BUCS competitions team completed the BUCS Competitions Landscape Review which provided a comprehensive assessment of existing league and knockout structures, shaped by member concerns around rising operational costs, travel demands, fixture congestion, and resource constraints. Through consultation with 110 staff from 72 institutions, the review identified pressures affecting accessibility, sustainability, and inclusivity across university sport.

Members highlighted challenges such as transport costs, scheduling difficulties, and inconsistent competition structures, alongside proposed solutions including regionalisation, extended seasons, revised fines and sanctions, and greater flexibility in fixture management. These findings were set against broader participation trends, including long term growth in major sports such as Football, Hockey, and Netball, increased female participation, and rapid expansion in emerging sports such as Futsal and Dodgeball.

In response, BUCS set out a series of actions aimed at modernising and futureproofing competition delivery. These included exploring regional competition frameworks for larger Category 1 and 2 sports, extending league seasons at Tier 2 and below, formalising fixture blocking practices, and reviewing both the National Trophy and Knockout Opt-out processes, including potential extension to Premier Tier teams. Enhanced support for regional delivery models reflected BUCS' commitment to strengthening collaboration and reducing administrative burden on institutions. This has given us strong foundations for pushing forwards for more significant change.

For reference:

- **Category 1:** Programmes with 180+ teams, six or more tiers, and 30 or more leagues.
 - These are the only programmes where the BUCS Executive believes further regionalisation of fixtures, leagues, or conferences can have a meaningful impact.
- **Category 2:** Programmes with 120+ teams and 5 or more tiers.
 - In these cases, further regionalisation may be viable but will need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.
- **Category 3:** All other programmes.
 - These are generally too small or have limited depth, making further regionalisation unfeasible.

Over the past 12 months, members have consistently raised concerns relating to the current modelling for the following reasons:

Financial: The current model is putting pressure on members to commit to not only the team entry fees, but to weekly transport costs which they note are continually rising, this is one of their biggest overheads associated to sport. There is an ask to try and localise competitions more to enable those who are playing at a more participation/recreation level to help reduce associated costs.

Student Experience: Due to universities with higher numbers of students entering large numbers of teams in their regions, they tend to end up playing themselves multiple times. Multiple teams sometimes lead to not being able to be promoted due to having other teams in the league above. Our rules and regulations prevent us from having more than a certain number of teams from the same university in each league. This in turn leads to poor student experience from other teams within these leagues. **Student lifestyles:** More students are time poor, for a range of reasons, be that they are commuter students, need to balance work and studying or have other responsibilities. With that, less have the freedom to commit to representing a team that would need to spare their whole Wednesday to travel for a fixture, with high waiting time whilst other sports are played, to then return to campus.

These current pressures evidence the need for more localised competition with less time commitments.

Environmental sustainability: Both universities and their students are committed to becoming more environmentally friendly. Weekly travel is often challenged on this basis, and therefore more localised competition is welcomed to balance sustainability and participation aspirations.

Playing Calendar: Currently the season is based on all competitions starting and finishing at similar times based on academic terms and the road to BUCS Big Wednesday. This is restrictive in a range of scenarios and can stop some people from engaging.

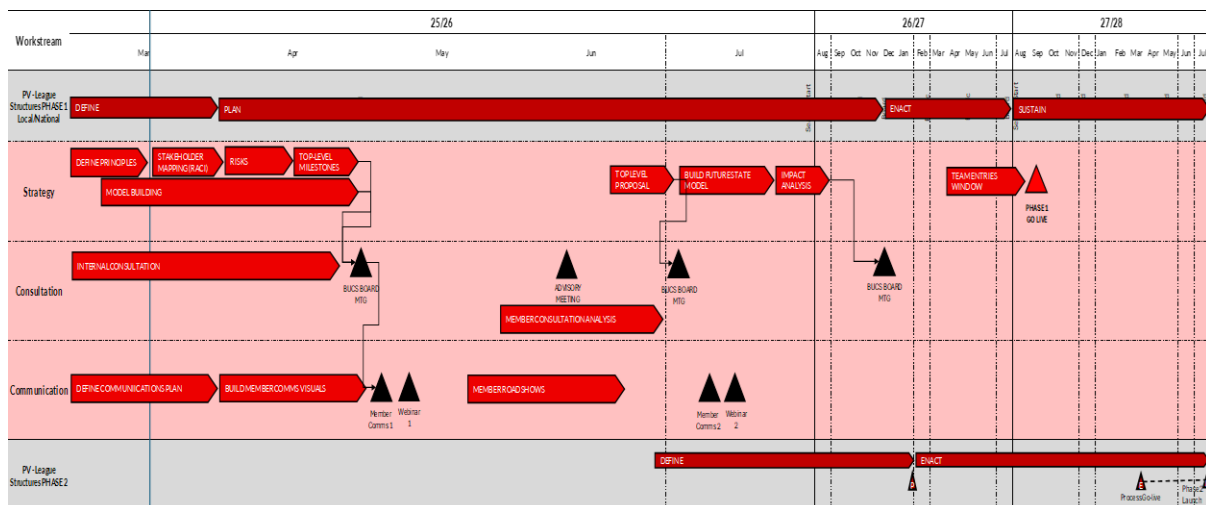
Over the past 12 – 24 months, members across several regions and nations have also piloted their own localised competition models to understand the impact they could have on mitigating some of the local challenges they have.

To summarise, there is significant localised activity taking place, which presents a potential risk (huge dilution and potential quality of experience) and therefore opportunity to the short- and long-term future of the league and knockout programmes for both BUCS, the members and their students.

As a result, we are now pursuing a change in offering that will enable member demand to be met within the BUCS programme, avoid duplication of provision, and mitigate risks for all involved to ensure we continue to provide a quality level of sports league and knockout competition for all students.

4. League and Knockout Evolution Timelines

Please see below a graphic detailing the strategic implementation timelines from the present through to September 2027. (Please refer to [Appendix 1](#) for the plan on a page in larger font size for easier reading.)



The communication and consultation timeline between now and July is summarised in the table below for you to understand the immediate short-term actions that will happen during Phase 1 of the project. The key aims for the next two months are to both communicate and consult with the you – the

members to understand your thoughts, support and challenge on our proposed opportunities for change. We will talk further to this timeline and process in the roadshows in more detail.

Table 1: Project- phase 1 timeline: March 26 – July 26

2026	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY
STRATEGY	Defined principles Stakeholder mapping Top Level milestones Began modelling	Build of comms and models and consultation plans	Deliver roadshow and webinar plans and routes to capture feedback	Analyse & define member feedback	Impact analysis of new direction – including financial, risks, governance and member impact.
COMMUNICATION	BUCS staff SME SMN Advisory Some regions and nations	BUCS Board BUCS Staff Advisory group	All members & member groups NGB partners Sports Advisory Groups	All members and member groups	BUCS conference and online webinar for all members on summary of consultation and next steps
CONSULTATION	BUCS staff / Management team and SLT	BUCS Board	In person member roadshows and online webinars Member survey	Member roadshows and webinars continued Advisory meeting Member survey	

5. Considerations & Implications

This project will ensure that the following considerations are embedded and considered at all stages:

- **EEDI** – We will complete an equalities impact assessment at the outset and utilise the Head of Belongings challenge throughout all stages of the process.
- **Sports Governance** – We will ensure that the sports governance structures that are determined via the review will be fit for purpose no matter the format determined.
- **Events Impact** – Should we choose to change the pathway from the league and knockouts to reach BBW to a more performance-based delivery model, we will understand and mitigate the impact on our current flagship and potential future events, including the student experience, the financial model and timings for tenders for all facilities and venues.

- **Digital and Technology** – As the project progresses, we will collaborate with the digital and technology team to ensure the systems needed are able to deliver any format changes necessary.
- **Commercial** – All current and future commercial partnerships and contracts will be considered throughout to ensure no negative impact. A new model of delivery could further enable growth for more commercial activity and will be considered when relevant.
- **Regions and Nations geography** – Due to the geography of the UK we are aware and must accept that there will always be some members that will always have to travel further than others and we (BUCS) will not be able to mitigate or positively impact this to the extent that we may be able to impact others by implementing geographical changes to our delivery models. We will be transparent about this from the outset.
- **Financial** – We would not progress any model that projects significant more costs onto members or BUCS and will review and consider the financial impact of delivery as we move through the process.

6. Key principles

Please note the key principles which will all be upheld throughout the review and subsequent proposals are referenced below.

- We will not lose sight of our core delivery and what our offering should provide – opportunity to play sport, represent university, create a sense of belonging, community and pride for all involved.
- We will not risk the loss of Wednesday afternoons for Sport (Extracurricular activity and the value we play in this.)
- We will not lose the element of the opportunity to participate in National / elite higher education sporting competition offer that provides a performance playing environment.
- We will not lose or risk our profile or change what we are best at delivering
- We will continue to provide a benchmark / rankings table for sport for universities
- We will diversify our offering to provide an opportunity for more localised competition.
- We will not consider the impact of points before deciding on the best delivery model for students.
- We will retain an excellent quality of standards for all elements of the programme.

7. Summary

To summarise, we will talk to all the above at the start of each roadshow/webinar to clarify the process from now onwards as we look forward to potential implementation of change for the 27/28 Season.

Please do now ensure you read and digest the [League and Knockout Evolution Modelling paper](#). We will provide ample opportunity at the roadshow sessions for you to share your thoughts and ideas on these.