

Managing membership disputes in tennis clubs

23 June 2026

HOWDEN



TENNIS
FOR BRITAIN

**Browne
Jacobson**



Disputes at clubs

What is the issue?

If not properly managed, disputes can:

- Become emotive
- Escalate
- Take up a great deal of volunteer time
- Cost the club a lot of money
- Lead to poor outcomes for everyone concerned

Management of a dispute should be fair and be seen to be fair.

Notification to insurers

- Insurers will not pay costs that are incurred prior to them agreeing policy cover
- If you appoint solicitors to deal with an internal club matter, this will be at the club's own expense
- If you appoint solicitors to deal with a claim prior to agreement from the insurer, this will be at the club's own expense

If in doubt, notify to Howden

Notification to insurers

Obligation to notify any claim or “circumstance that could give rise to a claim”

Early notification is beneficial. Response could be:

- Proceed with your internal procedures and keep us informed
- Insurers may advise and support (e.g. approve draft responses)
- Insurers may take over management of the matter, or appoint panel solicitors to handle the matter

If in doubt, notify to Howden

Managing Membership Disputes

What every club committee needs to know

Sarah Erwin-Jones | Partner, Browne Jacobson

Browne Jacobson

Why you're here tonight

Disputes in tennis clubs are increasing — and so are the consequences.

01	More complaints reaching insurers	Insurance scrutiny
02	More Equality Act claims	Legal exposure
03	More challenges to disciplinary decisions	Process risk
04	Reputational damage spreading fast on social media	Trust risk

**Most of this is
entirely
preventable**

Tonight is about practical steps: the policies, processes and records that keep committee decisions defensible.



The three scenarios that land clubs in trouble

01

The Drawer Policy

Rules exist — but no one knows about them.

02

Selective Enforcement

Rules exist — but only applied to some members.

03

The Swept Carpet

A problem exists — but the committee avoids acting.

All three have one thing in common: **procedural unfairness**



What is procedural fairness — and why does it matter?

Courts and tribunals do not just ask:

“Did the member break the rules?”

They ask:

“Did the club follow a fair process?”

A justified outcome reached unfairly is legally indefensible.

PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS MEANS

- 1 Members knew the rules in advance
- 2 They were told clearly what they were alleged to have done
- 3 They had a genuine opportunity to respond
- 4 The decision-maker was impartial
- 5 The same process was applied to everyone



Common causes of disputes

Behavioural

- Misconduct on and off court
- Social media incidents
- Conduct of parents or spectators at junior events

Governance

- Membership terminations with no clear process
- Unexplained committee decisions
- Inconsistent application of rules

Equality Act

- Failure to make reasonable adjustments for disabled members
- Discriminatory treatment linked to a protected characteristic
- Complaints mishandled or ignored



The Equality Act — don't ignore this

Nine protected characteristics apply to your members.

Age	Disability	Gender reassignment
Marriage / civil partnership	Pregnancy / maternity	Race
Religion or belief	Sex	Sexual orientation

COMMON CLUB MISTAKES

- “We treat everyone the same” — that is not always enough
- Failing to make reasonable adjustments for disabled members
- No accessible complaints procedure

Remember:
Equality sometimes requires treating people differently to achieve a fair outcome.



Your policies — the foundation

You need, at minimum:

- 1 Membership rules: rights, obligations, categories and fees
- 2 Code of conduct: members, parents, coaches and volunteers
- 3 Disciplinary and complaints procedure
- 4 Equality and anti-discrimination policy
- 5 Social media policy

The test for every clause

Too vague

“Members must behave appropriately.”

Specific enough

“Members must not engage in abusive, threatening or discriminatory behaviour towards any person at the club.”



Dissemination — the step most clubs skip

Golden rule

If you cannot prove a member had reasonable opportunity to know about a policy, you cannot fairly enforce it.

AT THE POINT OF JOINING

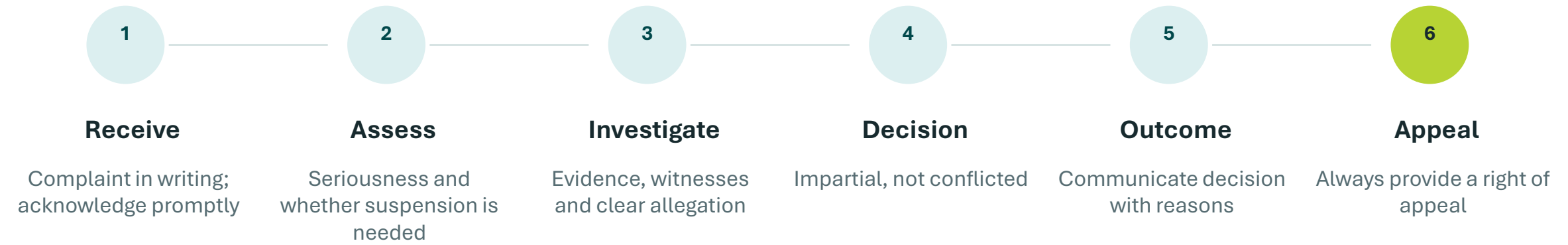
- Policies included in membership pack
- Signed acknowledgement obtained
- Parents or guardians sign for junior members

ONGOING

- Prominent place on website
- Noticeboard at the clubhouse
- Annual reminder at renewal
- Flagged at AGM when anything changes

Keep records of what was sent, when, and who acknowledged it.

Handling a complaint — the right process



Throughout

Document everything. Observe confidentiality. Set and keep to timescales.

Consistent enforcement — where clubs most often fail

These excuses will not protect you:

What clubs say	Why it fails
“She’s been a member for 20 years”	Tenure is irrelevant to a conduct breach
“He’s our best player”	Talent is irrelevant to a conduct breach
“They donate a lot to the club”	Financial contribution is irrelevant
“It’ll cause too much drama”	Inaction creates greater risk
“We had a quiet word”	Undocumented, unenforceable, unfair to the complainant

Same breach = same process = same range of sanctions. Every time.



A real-world lesson

THE SCENARIO

March A parent is caught drinking alcohol in the changing room. Written warning issued; process followed and documented.

July A committee member does the same at a club social. Committee says “just high spirits”; no action taken.

THE FALLOUT

- The March parent complains of double standards
- Policy becomes impossible to enforce
- Potential discrimination claim
- Trust in governance collapses
- Volunteers resign

Lesson: If you would not do it to a committee member, ask why you are doing it to anyone else — and vice versa.



Transparency and confidentiality — getting the balance right

BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT

- Your policies: published and accessible
- The fact that a process was followed and a decision reached
- Your governance structure

KEEP CONFIDENTIAL

- Specifics of any complaint or investigation
- Personal data: GDPR applies
- Safeguarding information: legal requirement

Suggested wording after a disciplinary outcome

“A complaint was received, it was investigated in accordance with our procedures, and a decision has been made. We are not able to share further details.”

This demonstrates accountability without compromising anyone’s rights.



Five questions to ask yourself tonight

- 01 **Can every member access our policies right now, easily?**
 - 02 **When did we last send them to members and get acknowledgement?**
 - 03 **Have we ever let something slide for a “difficult” member?**
 - 04 **If we started a disciplinary process tomorrow, could we follow it consistently and document it properly?**
 - 05 **Do our committee members know when to recuse themselves?**
-

 **If any answer concerns you — that is your starting point.**



What good looks like — your action list

This week

- Audit your policies: do they exist, are they clear and specific?
- Check they are accessible online and in the clubhouse

This month

- Re-send policies to all members with acknowledgement request
- Review whether your procedure includes all six steps
- Identify conflicts of interest on the current committee

Ongoing

- Enforce consistently — no exceptions
- Document every complaint and outcome
- Annual policy review and re-communication
- Training for committee members on fair process

Practical discipline: clear rules, visible policies, consistent process and records that stand up to scrutiny.



Key takeaways

01

Know your policies

and make sure every member does too

02

Procedural fairness protects

your club as much as your members

03

Inconsistent enforcement is legally dangerous

not just unfair

04

Document everything

every time

05

Take advice early

it is always cheaper than litigation

Thank you

Sarah Erwin-Jones

Partner, Browne Jacobson