



BUILDING THE FUTURE OF MEN'S JUNIOR HOCKEY IN ONTARIO

BRENDAN SHANAHAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2026, IIHF Triple Gold Club member and Hockey Hall of Fame inductee **Brendan Shanahan** (Mimico, ON) was announced as the lead of a governance review of men's junior hockey in Ontario.

After reviewing existing studies and before beginning his preliminary research, Brendan published an interim report that identified five pillars that appeared to be impacting the player experience across men's junior hockey in Ontario.

In addition to the more than 50 interviews Brendan then conducted with players, parents, commissioners, board members and executives, owners, coaches, subject-matter experts, media, billet families and fans, a widely-promoted public survey was launched to provide all Ontario men's junior hockey stakeholders with an opportunity to share their experiences with him.

The survey was completed by nearly 700 people, many of whom were current and former Ontario men's junior hockey players and parents.

In his final report, Brendan has included several recommendations for Hockey Canada, Hockey Eastern Ontario, Hockey Northwestern Ontario and the Ontario Hockey Federation to consider in order to enhance the player experience for men's junior hockey players in the province.



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By Brendan Shanahan

With the junior hockey landscape continuing to evolve across North America, many people and organizations invested in the game are asking themselves, “what’s next?”

Eligibility changes with the NCAA have increased options for hockey players and junior hockey leagues are preparing for the potential shifts without knowing exactly how this will shake out.

One thing we do know is that those involved with junior hockey in Ontario have told us that they remain committed to proactively responding to opportunities to enhance junior hockey for players, teams, leagues, communities and our province.

Since I began this project in January, my team and I have listened to more than 750 people who are invested in junior hockey in Ontario and passionate about ensuring the system in the province is positioned to thrive and will graduate even better players and people moving forward.

Regardless of the level of junior hockey they have experience with, or where in the province they live, I was extremely impressed with the passion and commitment of the people running the leagues and organizations.

And as I did my research, it became evident that while it was very important to identify areas that could and should be improved, an equal challenge was not getting sidetracked with certain argumentative issues that have in the past contributed to division, antagonism and conflict amongst the leagues, all to the detriment of the players and their experiences.

One example is the ongoing debate over the quality and competitiveness of each league as they relate to each other. The consistent feedback we received from many of the players, families and league officials that we interviewed was that what is most important to them was their specific team’s on- and off-ice environment and relationships with affiliate leagues to ensure proper development and competition for the player.

This final report includes recommendations intended to help evolve men’s junior hockey in Ontario to be an even greater system that is more athlete-centered, development-focused and has clearer pathways across the province.

And the recommendations represent what we heard throughout this project from the many stakeholders who participated in it, all of whom play an important role in ensuring junior hockey is positioned to thrive.

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First and foremost of the recommendations – all of which are detailed later in the report – is that to ensure consistent leadership and continued success in this evolving environment, Hockey Canada needs to take on a greater leadership role and create a new executive position with the sole mandate to oversee and support men's junior hockey in Ontario.

With that being said, it is important to acknowledge that one could do interviews and research for the next several years and still not have the same level of expertise and experience that the dedicated people who currently run men's junior hockey in Ontario have. Under the supervision of the new executive, an Advisory Committee made up of many of these individuals will play an important role now and moving forward.

Also, the new NCAA eligibility rules give hockey players more options, and that is a good thing for players and their families. However, one of the potential impacts on men's junior hockey in Ontario is that with more 19- and 20-year-old players considering a shift to US college hockey, our leagues anticipate becoming younger with more 16- and 17-year-olds competing for significant opportunities with men's junior hockey teams in Ontario.

Having said that, prior to beginning this project, the concept of more young players leaving their homes and communities to live with billet families didn't sound appealing to many, me included. However, the feedback I received from players and parents is that if implemented properly and with consistent standards, the modern billeting experience is overwhelmingly positive and greatly benefits the on- and off-ice development and maturation of young players.

The additional recommendations address other areas impacting the player experience and intended to help ensure men's junior hockey in Ontario is set to respond to further changes in the junior hockey landscape as they occur.

We hope that these recommendations benefit the on- and off-ice development of players, as well as making it less complicated for them and their families as they navigate men's junior hockey opportunities.

Thank you to everyone who volunteered their time to inform me of their experiences and contribute to the research.

Brendan Shanahan

RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN MEN'S JUNIOR HOCKEY IN ONTARIO

Governance and Leadership

1. Hockey Canada to create an executive role to oversee men's junior hockey in Ontario

Today's Reality:

Men's junior hockey in Ontario operates with a complex structure that includes the nine junior leagues, Hockey Canada, its three Ontario Members, the Ontario Hockey Association and the Northern Ontario Hockey Association.

These organizations have their own responsibilities, priorities, governance structures, commissioners, boards of directors and staff, which have contributed to inconsistent experiences and standards across levels for players.

As well, currently there is not one person with a dedicated mandate to oversee men's junior hockey across all leagues in Ontario and help ensure consistency throughout the system.

Stakeholders told us that they have frequently experienced challenges with the current structure, including a lack of clarity about who is responsible for advancing men's junior hockey in Ontario, overlapping responsibilities and inconsistent communication.

Many expressed the view that Hockey Canada should have a stronger leadership role and that men's junior hockey would benefit from having a direct connection to the national governing body, which would also establish a clear voice and direction for the sport.

With the men's junior hockey landscape changing rapidly and without a distinct system leader, we were told that the current structure makes it difficult to respond quickly and with consistency.



Ideal State:

The newly created executive position will serve as a central point of coordination across the nine men's junior hockey leagues, ensure a fair voice of governance across Junior A, B and C hockey, and be the main point of contact for league commissioners and staff.

This executive will help address system-wide priorities and improve the overall player experience, while enabling a more consistent approach to the day-to-day oversight of men's junior hockey in the province.

The role is also intended to provide Hockey Canada with greater ability to drive alignment and respond to system-wide priorities.

2. Separate the governance and delivery of men's junior and minor hockey in Ontario

Today's Reality:

Minor hockey is tremendously important, complex, time-consuming and, quite frankly, it appropriately has different priorities than men's junior hockey.

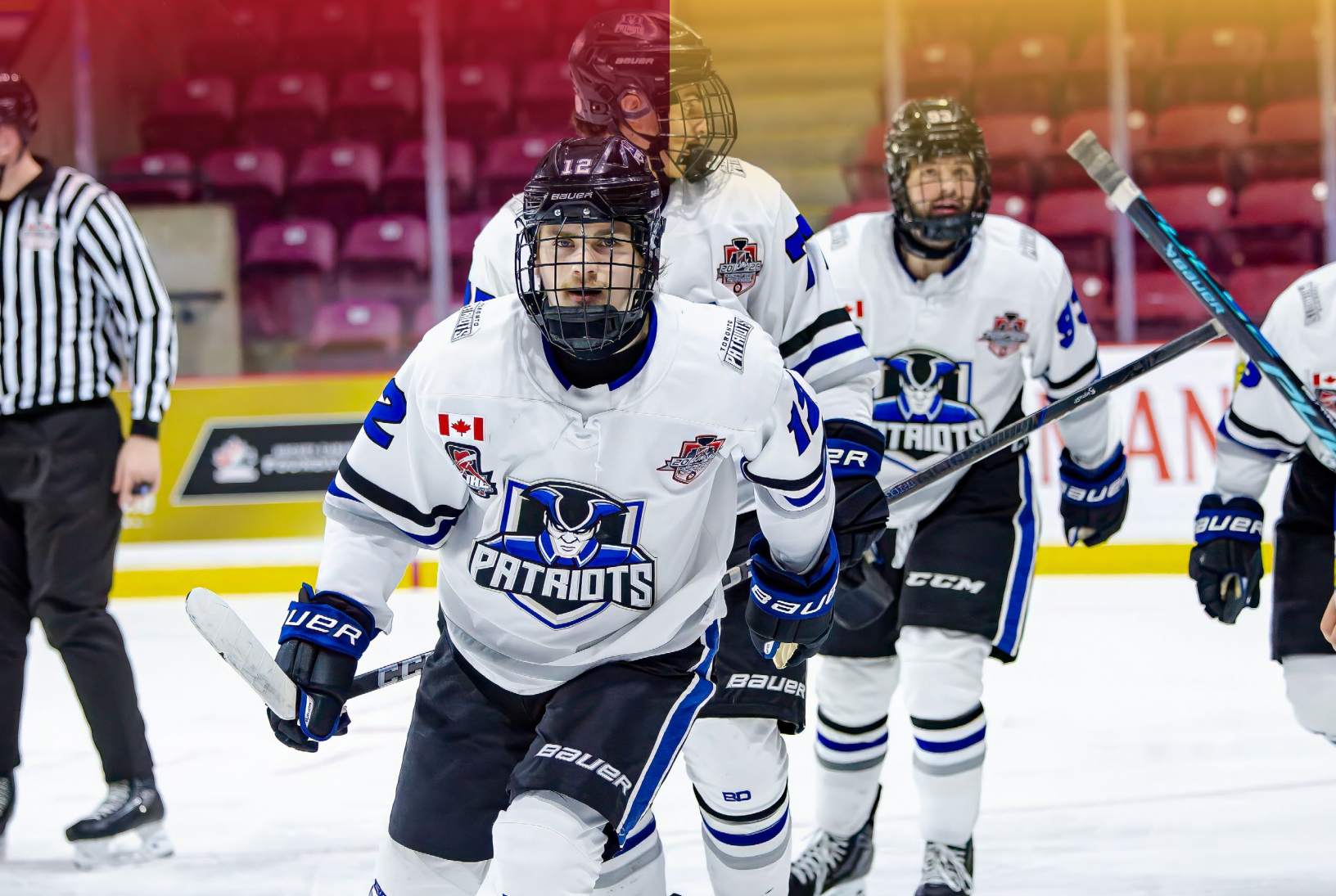
All nine men's junior hockey leagues in Ontario are governed by one of Hockey Canada's three provincial and territorial Members, which has led to conflicting priorities from the organizations that simultaneously lead minor and junior hockey.

Many stakeholders identified the need to separate the governance between the two different hockey streams.

Ideal State:

Hockey Canada would take on a more defined and active role to be the coordinating organization for men's junior hockey in Ontario, and the leagues would report to the new executive at Hockey Canada responsible for overseeing men's junior hockey instead of the three provincial and territorial Members to ensure they can prioritize overseeing minor hockey. While minor hockey would still be a natural feeder to junior hockey, those leading minor hockey would focus on minor hockey and those leading junior hockey would focus on junior hockey.

The three Ontario Members would continue to register men's junior hockey players in their system but would no longer be responsible for coordinating men's junior hockey leagues in order to better centralize leadership and strengthen consistency across leagues.



3. Hockey Canada to establish an Ontario men's junior hockey Advisory Committee that reviews and provides recommendations on potential rule, regulation and policy changes

Today's Reality:

Regulation and policy inconsistencies across the nine men's junior hockey leagues in Ontario are causing confusion amongst stakeholders and limiting the system's ability to react rapidly to changes in junior hockey.

Throughout this review, we were told by individuals and organizations that greater consistency and collaboration would significantly benefit players, teams and leagues.

Many expressed the view that people working in and around men's junior hockey every day should have a direct role to help identify issues and make recommendations on the future direction of the game, including having a formal process to review and respond to emerging issues as they arise.

We also were told that moving forward, it's important that perspectives from more people and organizations be represented in these discussions.

Ideal State:

Commissioners, owners, executives and coaches representing men's junior hockey leagues in Ontario will be appointed by Hockey Canada to serve on an Advisory Committee that is empowered to make recommendations to the executive overseeing men's junior hockey in Ontario moving forward.

This diverse group of voices will represent all different facets of men's junior hockey in Ontario.

The committee's first mandate would be to review and address six priority topics that were repeatedly mentioned by stakeholders throughout interviews:

A. Minimum requirements and operating standards should be established at both the league and team level, including conditions to own and operate a franchise and expectations for day-to-day team operations. This should include areas such as ownership and governance, financial viability, staffing and coaching qualifications, roster management, practice and game expectations and player support services (e.g., billets, education, safety). We were told that a player's experience is often influenced more by the team and organization than the league or classification of junior hockey itself. Many shared that minimum standards should not simply exist on paper, but should be supported by clear, accountable measures to protect players, preserve league integrity and ensure organizations consistently provide appropriate development environments. There was also recognition that establishing standards only work if there are processes in place to address situations if teams consistently fail to meet them.

B. Pay to Play: it was widely recognized throughout our interviews that it is a necessary reality for many teams, leagues and communities and most families are accepting and even embrace the concept if it improves the player experience and their development. However financial caps on Pay to Play and refunds, when certain conditions are not met in good faith, need to be discussed further. It was also communicated that increased transparency, clear expectations and ensuring players and families understand what is being provided in return for those fees would be well received. Standards only work if there are processes in place to address situations if teams consistently fail to meet them.



C. Roster sizes should be evaluated to ensure they support player development, including determining the appropriate size (e.g., 23 vs. 25 players). Consideration should also be given to whether roster sizes should vary by category (Junior A, B, C) to reflect differences in geography, player availability, commitment levels, and the role each level plays within the pathway. The general agreement is that roster sizes should be reviewed primarily through the lens of opportunity and player development.

D. Strengthen the use of player affiliation as an important development opportunity across men's junior hockey in Ontario. When done respectfully with cooperation amongst the leagues, this can help more players move and develop within the system while at the same time ensuring that teams at lower levels are not put at a disadvantage. Affiliation was frequently identified as an important player development tool and there was consensus that affiliations work best when they are focused on placing players in the right environment at the right time with meaningful development opportunities.

E. Review and make recommendations on age eligibility across men's Junior A, B and C hockey in Ontario, including the number of 16-year-olds in Junior A and Junior B, and potentially removing 16-year-olds from Junior C and extending that level's age limit to 22 years old. Age eligibility, in particular as it relates to 16-year-old players, was one of the most frequently debated topics throughout this review. While stakeholders held differing views on the appropriate number of younger players at each level, there was a general agreement that with the recent changes to NCAA player eligibility, more significant opportunities and playing time are opening up for younger players in men's junior hockey in Ontario.

F. Formalize a sub-committee specifically for goaltenders in Ontario. The intent is to enhance goaltender development opportunities, as we consistently heard that goaltenders require separate consideration within men's junior hockey. Many noted that young goaltenders have fewer opportunities available to them than skaters, and that their development timelines can vary significantly. Goaltender-specific considerations for age eligibility, affiliation and player movement rules were areas that were mentioned that may require additional flexibility to better support development at that position.hockey in Ontario.





Player Movement and Competition

4. All incoming 16- and 17-year-old men's junior hockey players in Ontario will be permitted to register with eligible teams across the province without the current geographic restrictions

Today's Reality:

The current player movement rules for *incoming* 16- and 17-year-old men's junior hockey players in Ontario are based on the boundaries of the three Ontario Members.

While these rules were established with good intentions, stakeholders frequently identified them as creating unnecessary barriers for players and families seeking the development opportunities they believe best support their specific needs. Many shared the view that players should have the ability to pursue opportunities that best support their development regardless of these boundaries.

Ontario remains an outlier compared to other provinces in Canada, as well.

For example, a 16-year-old player in Alberta can pursue a men's junior hockey opportunity anywhere in the province, regardless of the community they live in.

On the other hand, in Ontario, a player's opportunity may be limited by the Member boundary in which they reside in, regardless of whether a more appropriate development opportunity exists elsewhere in the province.

This has led to uprooting players and their families to establish residence with another Member or leaving the Hockey Canada system all together.

Ideal State:

All *incoming* 16- and 17-year-old men's junior hockey players in Ontario are free to play for any team in the province, regardless of their home Member Branch.

5. Adopt consistent playing rules aligned with the Ontario Hockey League across all men's junior hockey leagues in Ontario

Today's Reality:

The nine men's junior hockey leagues in Ontario follow the Hockey Canada Playing Rules, while the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) has its own Rule Book.

We were told by stakeholders that differences in these two sets of rules are unnecessary sources of confusion and complexity, including for players and officials that are involved with multiple leagues.

A common suggestion was that the Hockey Canada Playing Rules should continue to serve as the foundation for minor hockey, while men's junior hockey should operate under a harmonized Rule Book based on the OHL model, with modifications where appropriate.

Stakeholders maintained that greater consistency in the playing rules will create a more aligned men's junior hockey experience across Ontario and better support player development, while reducing unnecessary complexity.

Ideal State:

The Ontario Hockey League's Playing Rules serve as the foundation for junior hockey playing rules in Ontario to ensure consistency for players and officials, with specific exceptions:

- Fighting - Will continue to follow Hockey Canada Rule 7.10
- Facial Protection - Will follow IIHF Rule 202
- Additional rules that are not administratively practical at the Junior A, B and C levels

6. Improve communication and collaboration between men's junior hockey and Ontario University Athletics, accredited schools, and U18 and U16 hockey

Today's Reality:

The lack of alignment between men's junior hockey, Ontario University Athletics, U18, U16 and accredited schools in Ontario has caused friction between leagues as U18, U16 and accredited schools often compete for the same players. Also, the pathway to Ontario University Athletics should be better defined.

Throughout the review, we were told that communication and collaboration need to be improved, especially between men's junior hockey, U18 and U16 hockey, with stories of players and families having to navigate competing interests, overlapping tryout dates, inconsistent messaging and unclear pathways.

Ideal State:

These stakeholders are all partners of men's junior hockey in Ontario.

Stronger communication and formalized relationships between men's junior hockey, U18 and U16 hockey, accredited schools and university hockey, would better support players as they transition into and out of their junior careers.





Player Experience, Safety and Support

7. Develop a standardized billeting policy for men's junior hockey in Ontario

Today's Reality:

There is not a formal, standardized billeting policy that applies consistently across men's junior hockey in Ontario.

While many teams and leagues provide outstanding billeting experiences and have developed strong local practices, expectations around screening, education, oversight and support vary considerably.

Players and families repeatedly emphasized that the billeting experience has a significant impact on a player's development and overall junior hockey experience and agreed that all players leaving home to pursue hockey opportunities should benefit from a safe, supportive and consistent billeting environment.

Ideal State:

Led by Hockey Canada, create an Ontario Billeting Policy to be used by all men's junior hockey teams in Ontario.

8. Expand annual mandatory off-ice education and training courses from Hockey Canada

Today's Reality:

Many teams and leagues already provide valuable education, training and support for players.

However, off-ice education and training courses are overseen by individual teams and leagues, without consistency across the province. Codes of Conduct are also inconsistent.

We were told that Hockey Canada establishing greater consistency in player education, training and codes of conduct would ensure all players receive a similar level of support, regardless of where they play.

Ideal State:

All Ontario men's junior hockey players, coaches and staff complete annual training courses designed by subject-matter experts and endorsed by Hockey Canada to remove bullying, harassment and all forms of maltreatment from the game. Each men's junior hockey league complies with the same, standard code of conduct.

9. Require all men's junior hockey leagues in Ontario to have education consultants available to their players

Today's Reality:

The use of education consultants is entirely dependent on the willingness of each individual league and its teams.

We were frequently told that education is an important part of the player experience, and that some teams and leagues have developed very strong support systems and relationships with secondary schools, colleges and universities to assist players.

However, these supports are not consistently offered across Ontario.

Ideal State:

To ensure that players are supported throughout their time in a league, regardless of which team they play for, require that each league has a dedicated education consultant available to players at all times.

10. Create a Player Pathway Hotline and Advisory through Hockey Canada to give players and their families independent and real-time support and guidance as they make decisions that impact their hockey journeys

Today's Reality:

At a time when the men's junior hockey landscape continues to evolve rapidly in North America, we were consistently told that there is no neutral, reliable platform or mechanism available to assist players, prospective players and their families with available options and vital information as they make important development and life decisions.

Instead, most information is provided by leagues and teams that have vested interests in recruiting and retaining players.

Ideal State:

Hockey Canada would develop consistent resources that detail player pathways for players and their families. More importantly, a publicly accessible phone number and email address will be created for players and their families to contact, which will be managed in real-time by Hockey Canada's new executive overseeing men's junior hockey in Ontario to provide them with the individual attention they require.



11. Expand and enhance post-playing career pathway programs

Today's Reality:

Most men's junior hockey players in Ontario are already balancing hockey with education, employment and planning for their future careers.

And while many players aspire to continue their hockey careers after junior hockey, there was consistent acknowledgment that the vast majority of them will not.

However, the junior system continues to play an important role in helping players prepare for their next stage of life, allowing them to use the skills they've developed through hockey to be important contributors to their communities.

While some teams and leagues have developed excellent programs to assist players as they prepare for life after junior hockey, the availability of these initiatives varies significantly across the province and are implemented independently by leagues and teams.

Ideal State:

All leagues establish consistent development programs, with universal standards, to assist players with their transition to post-playing career opportunities.



NEXT STEPS

The Ontario Men's Junior Hockey Governance Review Committee has published an initial implementation guide in response to the 11 recommendations, which can be found [here](#).

