

Community Rugby League MORE THAN A SPORT REVIEW 2023



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Executive Summary

- The number of active participants has increased by 5% when compared to 2022.
- The most significant growth continues to be amongst women and girls (+33%) and inclusive playing offers (+51%).
- Community Rugby League at men's open age remains a cause for concern.
- The Brain Health Committee has made a series of recommendations which will be implemented in 2024 including reducing the tackle height.
- Most metrics used to assess strengths of competitions remain stable. There are regional challenges particularly in the North East and South West.
- The 9 England Community Lions teams played 27 games including the first ever women's tour to Serbia.
- Numbers of participants taking part in social variants of the sport continue to increase including 10,500 taking part in Try Tag Rugby activity.
- The current financial climate is challenging for clubs who we continue to support daily through a variety of initiatives.
- Various initiatives designed to improve touchline behaviours and environments have resulted in a slight reduction in the number of misconduct cases.
- The start of the 23-24 academic season has seen new activity for women and girls in both colleges and universities.
- We continue to work on programmes designed to aid personal development and improve health and wellbeing.
- We have significantly increased our data capabilities leading to more informed decision making and a more targeted approach to supporting underrepresented groups.
- As part of our desire to build stronger communities we are encouraging clubs to become more environmentally sustainable, and this forms a key part of our decision making.
- We have delivered against our obligation to deliver a new volunteer strategy.
- With the ongoing support of Sport England and The Football Foundation over £1.5m has been invested into community facilities in 2023.

Introduction

Welcome to the latest Community Rugby League More Than a Sport Update. This update summarises the activity undertaken by the Development Team together with partners in the second half of 2023 and serves as an end of year report.

Active Participants

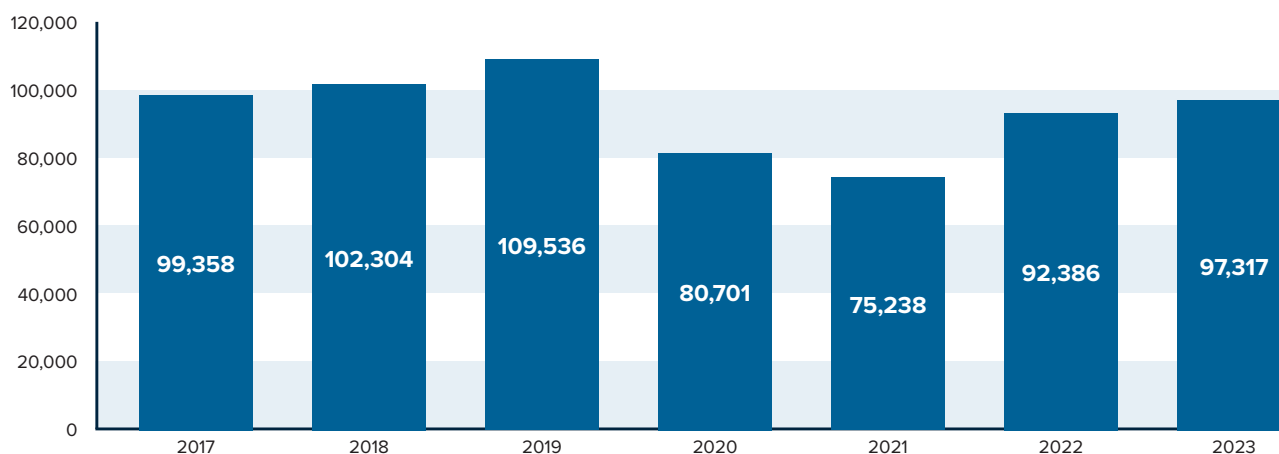
As part of our partnership with Sport England we report twice yearly on numbers of active participants. This reporting takes place at the end of August and at the end of December. The mid-year reporting in August focuses on the numbers of our participants in core community club settings, with other settings, such as education and social activity reported in full at the end of each year.

Activity within education settings such as schools, colleges and universities take place within academic years. The numbers of active participants within education settings reported at the end of 2023 will be based on activity that took place between the start of the autumn term in 2022 continuing through until the end of the summer term in 2023.

The data outlined below is significant as it represents the first opportunity to assess the potential legacy of the RLWC2021 in participation terms. As with any major tournament an increase in participation is invariably one of the key factors used to measure the success of the tournament. With the RLWC2021 being the most inclusive tournament delivered so far, maximising growth amongst Women and Girls and Wheelchair RL participants was a key focus.

The chart below tracks the total number of active participants since 2017 when we introduced our new online registration system.

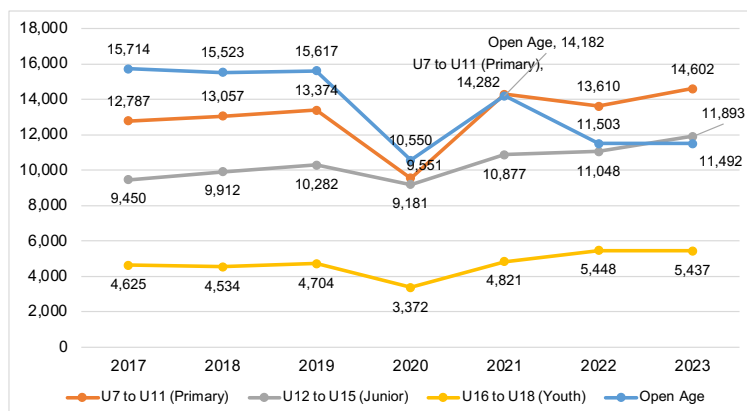
Total rugby league participants since 2017



- Total participants have increased year on year since Covid-19's impact in 2020/2021.
- Baseline at the start of 2017 was 95,000.

We have seen a year-on-year increase in participants since the two Covid affected years of 2020 and 2021. What we are clearly seeing is no immediate bounce back to pre-covid levels but a more graduated year on year increase like what we witnessed in the 3 years prior to the pandemic. Clearly the pandemic did change people's sporting habits and not all those habits have returned as restrictions were eased.

Total community club based players by age group group



The above graph represents similar tracking of active participant groups since 2017 according to age. Whilst participants in our Primary, Junior and Youth age groups show a trend, the outlier is open age where we have seen a decline between 2022 and 2023. This is concerning as whilst we did see some growth between 2018 and 2019 the long-term trend has shown numbers decreasing.

The table below gives a more detailed breakdown of numbers of active participants in our core community settings based on age and gender.

Core Community - Age / Gender

Age groups	Baseline 2017	2022 End of Year	2023 End of Year	End-Year 22 to 23 Difference
U7 to U11 (Primary)	12,000	13,610	14,602	7%
Boys		12,197	12,430	2%
Girls		1,413	2,172	54%
U12 to U15 (Junior)	9,400	11,048	11,893	8%
Boys		9,359	9,419	1%
Girls		1,689	2,474	46%
U16 to U18 (Youth)	4,800	5,448	5,437	0%
Boys		4,559	4,639	2%
Girls		889	798	-10%
Open Age	18,099	11,503	11,492	0%
Men		10,140	9,798	-3%
Women		1,363	1,694	24%
Totals Male	0	36,255	36,286	0%
Totals Female	0	5,354	7,138	33%
Total		41,609	43,424	5%

Overall, the numbers of players based in community clubs increased by 5%. This growth has been driven by an increase in the number of players in junior age groups regardless of gender. The most significant growth continues to be amongst women and girls with over 7,000 now playing within community clubs. Recently introduced RFL programmes such as 'Rugbees' and 'Futures' have contributed significantly to this accelerated growth. The one area of concern remains men's open age numbers. This trend is not unique to rugby league and many of the challenges are societal. However, we are doing all we can to understand why transitioning and retaining players in this setting is particularly challenging as we seek to put appropriate interventions in place.

Much of the RFL Community Strategy from 2017 onwards was designed to maximise the benefit of the RLWC2021, in particular, continuing to drive accelerated growth amongst under-represented groups including women and girls and our inclusive playing offers.

The number of female participants in the first full season post World Cup increased by 33%.

Women & Girls

Age Group	Female
Primary (U7 to U11)	2,172
Youth (U12 to U15)	2,474
Junior (U16 to U18)	798
Open Age	1,694
Total	7,138

When looking at similar data relating to our Inclusive Playing Offers the overall increase was 51% with an impressive 74% increase in Wheelchair RL. Credit is due to the England Wheelchair RL Team who have attended numerous events to continue to promote the sport.

Inclusive Playing Offers

Core Indicators	2021 End of Year	2022 End of Year	2023 End of Year	End-Year 22 to 23 Difference
Physical Disability RL	151	155	263	70%
Learning Disability RL	184	318	388	22%
Wheelchair	274	269	467	74%
Totals	609	742	1,118	51%



CE
PROPERTY FINANCE

STEFAN
SUPER LEAGUE

PARIS

STEEDS
LEAGUE MATCH
RUGBY LEAGUE

V
OXEN

Education and Social Offers

The second largest source of participants comes from the education sector. Compared with the end of 2022 we have seen a 5% increase in the number of participants across schools, colleges, and universities.

Indicators	2022	2023
Schools	33,061	34,620
Colleges	560	700
Universities	1,094	1,255
Totals	34,715	36,575

Our social forms of Rugby League also contribute significant numbers of participants to our total number of active participants. Overall, we have seen a 13% increase since the end of 2022. Our partners Try Tag Rugby contribute significantly to the overall total of 13982 with 10596 players.

Indicators	2022	2023
Touch	638	1,090
Tag	92	0
Try Tag Rugby	9,714	10,596
Masters	1,936	2,008
X-League	165	181
Walking	0	107
Totals	12,545	13,982

Brain Health

The previous two 'More Than a Sport Updates' referenced the ongoing work relating to Brain Health. The RFL as the National Governing Body and community clubs have a duty of care to mitigate risk and protect players whilst recognising that Rugby League is a physical sport.

Throughout 2023, the RFL Brain Health Committee has been meeting to review data from the law modification trials, other scientific and medical research and consider the impact of potential changes to the sport. In November 2023, the Brain Health Committee made a series of recommendations which included changes to rules, regulations and playing calendars designed to safeguard players and the future of the sport. These recommendations can be found here [New for 2024 \(rugby-league.com\)](#).

Core Community

The community game provides the foundation on which the sport is built. We aim to support sustainable growth through targeted programmes and initiatives, appropriate playing opportunities and more flexible ways to play. Key to growing the game is our ability to retain more players which necessitates culture changes and improvements in our environments.

Participant Growth

Centering our approach around the player experience, driving both growth and retention, is anchored in our commitment to providing appropriate playing options and aspirational opportunities. We have successfully delivered over 200 events during 2023 including over 30 showcase finals providing aspirational playing opportunities.

Our dedicated Delivery Team are focussed on delivering customer centric competitions to ensure we are providing appropriate playing offers.

Following the conclusion of the summer-based competitions, we have been looking ahead to the 2024 season. While each competition will adhere to slightly varied timelines based on their start dates, we have begun to review each competition and seek feedback from teams involved so we can start to draw up calendar and structure proposals for 2024.

As highlighted earlier, there is a concern regarding the decline in open age players. Of the 12 open age competitions that ran in 2023, 7 experienced a decrease in registered participants compared to the previous season. While there were positive increments in 5 competitions, none of the increases exceeded 3 figures, whereas 4 competitions witnessing a decrease did so. The competitions that saw the biggest reduction in registered players by number were the NCL, SCL, North East Men's League, and North West Men's League.

Collectively, the total number of registered players across the 12 open age competitions fell by approximately 3.5% between 2022 and 2023. The data pertaining to the number of open age clubs per competition tells a similar story. Of the 12 open age competitions, only 2 saw an increase in the number of clubs between 2022 and 2023. 6 competitions reported a decrease, with all 6 also witnessing a reduction in registered players. The overall count of clubs engaged across the 12 open-age competitions fell by 6.4% between 2022 and 2023.

While acknowledging that this trend is not unique to our sport, we are committed to conducting an in-depth review of the open age game in 2024. The objective is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the decline, enabling us to implement appropriate interventions effectively.

A summary of the 2023 competitions can be found below.

National Conference League

The National Conference League (NCL) season concluded with the Premier Division Grand Final played at Featherstone Rovers in front of a crowd of over 1200. Hunslet ARLFC were victorious, overcoming West Hull to clinch the title for the third consecutive season. Eight games, including the final, were televised live on OurLeague. For the first time since the Covid pandemic, an awards presentation event was held at Old Trafford Cricket Ground, preceding the Super League Grand Final.

The number of disciplinary cases dropped from 180 in 2022 to 120 this season. In 2024, Distington from West Cumbria will join the competition, being the only successful application from four clubs that applied. Several teams have acknowledged struggling to fulfil fixtures during the season, prompting the NCL Management Team to meet with each of them and offer support. The Management Team are looking to ensure all teams meet the minimum standards set by the league, as they are aware some teams are currently falling short in certain areas. Teams will be given two years to address any shortfalls.

It is also recognised that several players who have signed to play with professional clubs from the NCL are not getting sufficient game time, as such, the NCL is looking to introduce dual registration next season to allow these players an opportunity to play in the community game.

Southern Conference League

The Southern Conference League (SCL) season concluded with a final, where Hammersmith Hills Hoists emerged victorious against Wests Warriors. The event coincided with the Harry Jepson Final, where Medway Dragons triumphed over Telford Raiders, marking the first final of its kind since before the pandemic. Looking ahead to the 2024 SCL Competition, all eight teams from 2023 are set to return, along with London Skolars rejoining after their withdrawal from League 1.

Yorkshire Men's League and North West Men's League

The Yorkshire Men's League (YML) end-of-season playoff finals were hosted for the first time at the Horsfall Stadium in Bradford, featuring four games over a span of two days. The North West Men's League (NWML) concluded with four games taking place over two days at Ince Rose Bridge in Wigan. The end of season review for the YML yielded positive results in all metrics, with the number of registered players, active players, and games played all increasing when compared to 2022. Notably, the number of games played was the highest figure on record, since the introduction of the GameDay system in 2017.

Looking ahead to 2024, the goal is to build upon the robust entry criteria previously introduced, ensuring that a team's past performance is taken into consideration when forming divisions for the following season. Naturally, we would expect this to lead to a larger merit or entry division, which we can adapt following further discussion with the teams involved. Each season we are looking to move closer towards a structure where only those willing and able to complete all scheduled fixtures are entered into a structured division. The question of regionalising divisions where possible, was also featured frequently in the post-season surveys. The respective Management Groups will meet early in 2024 to review all the applications received and create the initial calendar and structure proposals.

Southern Competitions

Since the conclusion of the Southern Regional Competitions in August, post-season meetings have taken place with all regions to review 2023 activity and plan for 2024. This was followed up with a survey to all clubs, to ensure a collaborative approach to any potential changes. As indicated in the mid-year update, there are greater concerns in some regions than others. The London and Midlands regions both had positive seasons, and we would hope that both continue to build on those successes in 2024.

The East, West, and South West regions are of greater cause for concern, with each having struggled to varying extents in 2023. The East Premier struggled with fixture completion, with SCL 2nd teams having the biggest impact. Having consulted with the teams affected, there seems to be renewed confidence they will return stronger in 2024. There is also a possibility that teams who performed well in the Merit Division in 2023, may be capable of stepping up to the Premier, which would further strengthen that division. The West of England League is arguably the region of greatest concern, and a proposal has been sent to all clubs in the region ahead of the 2024 season. The proposal is centred around a 9s series, which we believe to be realistic and attainable for those that wish to be involved. This will hopefully then create a foundation to build on for future seasons. Likewise, further consultation is needed with the clubs in the South West, it may be the region reverts to a Merit offer, as has been the case in previous seasons, rather than a structured division, as that may be more appropriate.

Holistically each region has struggled with Match Official availability, with Regional Premier fixtures regularly going unappointed. This has caused issues, and often places club representatives in the unenviable position of having to officiate matches to ensure they go ahead. Rugby Union, particularly outside of the traditional Rugby League heartland areas, provides greater competition for players, but also impacts the availability of facilities and the window in which activity can take place. The geographical spread of teams within a region can also have a negative impact on both clubs and players. The increase in the cost of travel, training, and facilities has been significant. Despite these challenges, there is a positive trend evident across all metrics when compared to the 2022 season. Notably, there is a 26.5% increase in active players and a 15% increase in the number of games played. To address the shaping of playing offers for 2024, the expertise, knowledge, and insights of the Southern Competition Group will once again be leveraged.



The London Primary and Junior League had a positive season in 2023 with the clubs involved in the League stabilising and building strong age groups. The completion rate of games was very high with U16s completing 93%, U14s completing 91% and U12s completing 80%.

The League continued with plate finals which were introduced in 2022, this ensured the lower half of the leagues remained engaged, played for longer and got to experience a finals day at a fantastic venue in Hemel Stags.

The plate finals and grand finals involved 7 different clubs and there were 5 different winners. Eastern Rhinos, London Skolars, Bromley Bengals, Elmbridge Eagles and St Albans all came out as winners and the U12s final was decided by a nail-biting golden point.

Challenges remain in the South, but the League has begun to build consistency and clubs are developing within that consistent framework.

There has also been a slight increase in primary engagement, and the League hope to build on that in the 2024 season by including a Primary Lead on the League Management Board who will hopefully encourage more clubs to participate and drive Primary RL standards up within the region.

Barrow and District Youth League

In the Barrow and District Youth Competition, the final fixture completion rate was 94%, with 6 games not going ahead. Both the U12s and U14s divisions remained very competitive, with the league leaders and play off & cup final winners being shared out between several clubs. The culmination of the Primary RL season saw a hugely successful festival held at Craven Park (home of Barrow Raiders) with over 450 players taking part. The aim is to increase the number of age groups in Barrow & District, possibly to include an U13s.

West Cumbria Youth League

In the West Cumbria Youth League, fixture completion was also very high, with 30 more games played than in 2022. There was also a slight reduction in the number of games that were cancelled, which is a positive. Again, the leagues have been closely contested as well as the cup competitions. Due to the varying number of teams per age group, the U13s and U16s finished before the school holidays, whilst the U12s and U14s came back for league fixtures and top 4 playoffs, plus their relevant cup competitions. The trophies were shared out between four clubs, with three of those being crowned champions after the league season ended.

Consistent numbers are starting to progress through from Primary RL to the older age groups. In 2024 it is likely an U18s competition will be introduced, highlighting this point further.

City of Hull and District Youth League

City of Hull and District Youth League experienced a positive season, witnessing a 7% increase in player registrations compared to the previous season. Fixture completion was notably robust, with only 5 scheduled games (all at U18s) not taking place. Successes from the season included finals days encompassing age groups from U12s through to U18s, along with development days. The key challenges for the region are setting up new clubs and ensuring these new clubs can find sufficient coaches and volunteers to remain sustainable.

Yorkshire Junior League

In the Yorkshire Junior League, fixture completion is increasing, and the number of games played overall was higher than in 2022. The primary age groups are continuing to grow and get stronger, as these teams move into the competitive age groups, we anticipate a more stable base. Whilst we have seen a reduction in the number of clubs and teams, the number of players has remained at similar numbers to 2022. The 3 full days of finals had record attendances and it was positive to see teams from a variety of different clubs. Youth teams (U16s and U18s) played until they finished their fixtures (no later than 31st August), with the younger age groups having a summer break and then playing up until the end of October. The division winners were spread out amongst many clubs including 2 who only came into existence in 2019. Another positive was a significant reduction in the number of discipline cases dealt with, this was down almost 27% on the previous season. The high volume of rearranged fixtures remains a challenge.

North West Junior League

In the North West Junior League there has been an increase in the number of registered players, teams and games played when compared to 2022. There are still challenges with too many coaches having a 'win at all costs' mentality. More emphasis is needed to educate coaches on the need to prioritise player development over winning. There are also issues with a shortage of match officials.

North West Youth League

In the North West Youth League, the number of registered players, clubs, and teams involved has increased compared to last season. The number of games played remained at the same level as 2022. Each age group featured three events, including the Lancashire Cup, League Cup Final, and League Plate Final. Notably, there was a 27% reduction in the number of discipline cases dealt with compared to last season. Challenges persist with getting referees to wear headcams despite many of them being provided for use each weekend.

England Community Lions

Our England Community Lions programme, which consists of 9 representative teams, played 27 games this year, including the first ever Women's tour to Serbia in October, playing two games against the Serbian Women's team.

The programme hosted 26 trials to select the final squads and ran 38 training sessions. Over 1100 players were nominated by their community clubs with 492 attending the trials and 165 players getting an opportunity to play for their country at community level.

Our U16 & U18 teams participated in the first Four Nations competition, with our U17s hosting France U17s. The U19s hosted a Brazil select team in November and the U23s played against Wales Dragonhearts and Ireland A. England Universities Men won the Men's Presidents Cup and the Student Four Nations held in Wales, with the England Student Women winning both their games to lift the Women's Presidents Cup. Our World Cup winning Physical Disability RL team played a two-game series against Wales PDRL and our Men's open age team recently held a Reds v Blues trial game as part of the selection process for the 2024 programme. Rugby League Cares provided well-being support enhancing the programme with the introduction of self care guides and regular workshops including brain health, sleep, and nutrition.

There were several challenges including the cost of the programme to participants, particularly those on low income, for travelling to trials and training. The lack of a central base for Rugby League for training and games can be a challenge with community clubs hosting their own fixtures at the weekends. Having a central base also eliminates the debate of where we should train.

The withdrawal of Newcastle Thunder and London Broncos Academy Programmes has provided an opportunity for more Lions activity in those regions embracing a new player pool. The coordination of extra trial sessions and games has increased the workload across the volunteer workforce.

All programmes are well supported at the games, particularly by friends, families, and teammates. The community club that can host us for training is rewarded with an opportunity to host a game, whereby they are able to generate much needed income via an entrance fee and bar/tuck shop sales. The players and staff feedback are positive. They are grateful for the chance to represent their country and can see by staying in the game there are also other opportunities to do it again with an older age group within the programme. The programmes have also acted as a springboard for many players with an aspiration to play at a higher level, with many gaining academy contracts, semi-professional contracts and full-time contracts within the professional game.

The programme also supports the development of volunteers, especially coaches. As well as providing hands-on experience we provide regular coach CPD. An example of this would be the RAGE identification process used by our performance colleagues working on the England Performance Unit.

Social Rugby League

Social Rugby League (SRL) including non, minimal, and limited contact variants have become an integral part of the RFL's development. We recognise that not everyone wants to play full contact versions of the sport. Flexible ways to play provide customer choice, increased retention, transition offers and support equality. SRL playing opportunities have increased from 2022 and we aim to build and maintain the growth in 2024. Data-driven research conducted by the RFL in 2023, provided insight that all five different variants of SRL engaged different unique active participants within each section, highlighting the key physical, mental health & social impact benefits.

Facilities were the main challenge across the whole of SRL, particularly the cost and availability of floodlit artificial pitches including all year-round access.

Tag Rugby League

Try Tag Rugby (TTR), our delivery partner, reached 10,596 active participants in 2023, with a 60% male and 40% female split across all participants. Two new locations (Brighton & Rugby) provided TTR with their most active league locations ever (18), where 250 match officials took charge of matches. The medal success at the ITF Tag World Cup in Ireland provided a first gold medal for Great Britain. The formation of Tag Sports CIC to deliver community projects to target and engage more junior, women's and ethnically diverse groups, is a welcome new initiative. Availability and access to floodlit artificial pitches were highlighted as the main barrier to further potential growth and maintaining the playing figures throughout the winter months.

Touch Rugby League

The 2023 Foundation Touch Series relaunched in a regionalised format structure, 19 foundations engaged with over 1,000 participants through Touch Rugby League (TRL) sessions, events, and leagues. The formation of minimal-contact social and competitive playing environments was heavily dominated by male participants (95% men to 5% women). Nevertheless, this has prompted new "women's only" TRL activities within community clubs. Premier Touch Rugby League, the elite touch competition for club foundations, was a huge success in 2023. The competition provided players, match officials and staff with the unique opportunity of experiencing playing at a first-class facility in Robin Park Arena, Wigan. The England Touch Association provided Match Officials support to the competition. We will aim to support the upcoming 2024 Touch World Cup via the 2024 Foundation Touch Series and the 2 additional Premier Touch Rugby League events. The main challenge within TRL in 2023 was access to facilities due to the standard of grass playing pitches, highlighting the demand for more grass/artificial playing areas during the adverse weather months.

Masters Rugby League

Masters Rugby League reached a key milestone of over 2,000 registered players in 2023. As Masters is a heavily male dominated SRL format, 2024 will focus on increasing the number of registered female participants, which was 88 in 2023. The relaunch of the England Community Lionhearts Masters team will focus on rewarding player participation at Masters Festivals in 2024. With festival dates announced early this year, Clubs were able to co-ordinate festival dates with their fixtures to create a cohesive Masters calendar. A peak of 40 match officials were active throughout 2023, this remains an area of focus for recruitment, not just within this section, but throughout each individual social format.

A key learning from RFL data between 2021 – 2023 showed the average age of players involved in Masters is decreasing slowly from 49 to 47 (men) and 45 to 43 (women). The data showed more people aged 30-49 were participating in Masters than those aged 50 and over.

X-League

The standardisation of X-League rules in 2023 contributed to the growth of active participants (181), Merit League fixtures, and Grand Prix's. This growth also saw an international fixture played between England Community Lionhearts and Ireland which provided players with a social and competitive opportunity. The development of X-League is still in the embryonic phase. Those players taking part clearly enjoy the relatively new version of the sport. We will continue to work with all those involved to take any appropriate learnings onboard and make suitable modifications ahead of rolling out the format more widely.



Playing Opportunities

In addition to ensuring our competition offers are attractive and providing aspirational playing opportunities, we strive to deliver new and different ways to play and engage with the sport. This includes continuing to embed the principles of Player Development Leagues within the existing youth and junior competition framework and delivering Player Development Leagues where appropriate across the country.

The introduction of new playing opportunities under the Player Development League umbrella has seen mixed results throughout 2023.

Greater Manchester Rugby League

Embedding Rugby League activity in new areas with limited infrastructure and a significant number of well-established competing sports is a challenge. Whilst investment has continued, we haven't seen the same progress as in the previous two years. We are considering what the most appropriate offer is working with partners including Salford Red Devils and Manchester Active.

Midlands

The Player Development League is progressing well and is a real success story with over 200 players playing at each festival. These have taken place across the region from Shrewsbury to Bassetlaw. Over 600 players are registered to clubs in the league. The league is led by Chair Phil Abbott and is moving in the right direction.

West of England

All Golds are taking a lead in the region and junior development games have taken place across the summer. Cheltenham Phoenix, All Golds, West Oxfordshire Levellers and Swindon St George have all taken part in activity. Review meetings are in place so we can look to understand what is working well and what is not.

Taking and sharing learnings is important in shaping activity. Establishing sustainable activity in areas where there has been little, if any, is a significant challenge. In 2024 there will be a greater focus on areas where there is some existing activity or has been in the past with greater access to existing Rugby League infrastructure. Examples include North Yorkshire and Lancashire.

Embedding in existing competitions

In 2023 we have soft launched the Lions Development Programme a new player and coach development initiative which helps embed player development principles.

Much of the work in this area is led by Foundations who see the significant value of this type of activity. As the playing calendar evolves following the Brain Health recommendations, we expect to see further opportunities to develop our young players in different environments.

The City of Hull continue to lead the way in this regard. They run development days across the various age groups throughout the season and have set high standards around player experience at their final's events and development games.

The North East has unfortunately seen its number of teams and players reduce; we are working with the key stakeholders to put a plan in place to consolidate for 2024.

We need to do more to engage with the largest playing leagues, the Yorkshire Junior League, and North West Youth and Junior Leagues to further embed these principles in 2024.

Increase the Number of Female Participants

Maintaining the accelerated growth in the number of women and girls playing Rugby League remains a priority. We are achieving this through a combination of new programmes, appropriate competition structure and supporting community clubs to offer women and girls activity.

Girls Growth Programmes

There is strong connectivity between our strategy and vision for women's Rugby League at the elite end of our game and the growth programmes created for the youngest of female players. We are seeing the impact this connectivity is having in the numbers and experiences of the young girls taking part across our programmes. As expected, we have again seen an increase in the numbers of players registered across both the Women's and Girls Leagues, with more games played.

Futures

Whilst the Futures Programme finished in summer 2023, there has been lots of success to build on in 2024 with community clubs that have been involved in the programme expressing interest in being part of competitive girls' leagues for 2024. Working with recognised women's clubs across expansion areas and directly with community clubs, this programme has proved to be a success in progressing hubs into becoming competing teams. This is a learning we will take into 2024 to ensure we are more targeted with our community clubs that may be interested in starting girls' activity.

RugBees

The RugBees programme was created off the back of the huge profile and visibility provided by the Rugby League World Cup. The aim was to connect the inspiration provided by our top athletes across Women's Super League and the National Team, into a bespoke programme which removes as many barriers as possible for young girls to try our sport.

Women's Rugby League

A period of rapid growth can result in a degree of fragility necessitating a period of consolidation. The leagues below the Championship have been inconsistent in 2023, however we have planned a restructure in 2024 to accommodate the teams coming down from the Women's Super League (WSL) which should help rectify this. We will use fixture completion as a key indicator for 2024.

Interestingly there have been several teams in the merit leagues (including new clubs such as Oldham, North Wales, and Heysham Atoms) who have played more games than some in structured divisions providing other options for 2024.

The focus for 2024 will be to successfully transition the four clubs who competed in the WSL in 2023, ensuring all clubs are competing in the most appropriate division and improve fixture completion rates.

Girls Rugby League

Another hugely successful Girls League ran in 2023 with 450 new registered players. The number of games played has risen by 30% from 2022 with an overall fixture completion rate of 95%, which would compare favourably with any league in the country. However, there are still areas for improvement based on the key themes we have identified from data and feedback from the end of season surveys.

These include:

Player development programmes – Both from an aspirational and player development view a new player development programme should be explored.

Coach development – To help players develop we also need coaches to develop. There is no bespoke 'coaching in the female game' modules or workshops.

Greater media coverage – The benefit of greater media coverage was a common theme which we are looking to address in 2024.

Touchline environments – Reinforce the importance of appropriate coach and adult behaviours.

Women's strategy – Improved communication with clubs around the wider women's strategy.

College and University

The start of the 23-24 academic season has brought brand new activity for Women and Girls in both Colleges and Universities. We started the girls College season with a development day at Cronton College, followed by some festival style game activity. Eight colleges took part in the event, totalling 90+ participants. The players received coaching from two Women's international Head Coaches: England's Stuart Barrow and Wales' Tom Brindle. They were accompanied by coaches from the RFL Performance Department and Development staff. This has been followed by bi-weekly festivals hosted by participating colleges in the North West and Yorkshire, where teams can commit to each individually as suits.

There have been two Women's University events and the start of the new Winter League since students returned in September. We hosted the 2023 Women's University RL Forum tied in with a Women's England Performance Unit training session. The 25 attendees were granted pitch side viewing of the field session, a workshop and Q&A with Captain Jodie Cunningham and Leah Burke, before participating in their own training session in the afternoon led by Head Coach Stuart Barrow and DiSE Manager Conor Meese.

We followed this up with the launch of the new Women's University Winter League at the end of October, the product of 6 months of conversations with key stakeholders via the SAG and individual meetings. The feedback we received from new and existing teams about the desire for an appropriate playing offer led to the creation of this new playing offer, and 6 teams will compete for the inaugural title which will be decided in March 2024. To complement the league and give students brand new to the sport an invaluable taster in a less competitive and conditioned event, we hosted a Development 9s event at Loughborough University which was attended by 5 of the 6 participating teams from the Winter League. Our firm goal in this area remains to provide evidence to BUCS Sport Review that a sound 'Proof of Concept' exists for the approval of BUCS Women's RL events in the 24-25 season. Social mobility continues to be a key focus. We want our young female players to be inspired to play Rugby League in the same way as young males from our communities are.

Sustainable Community Game

Community Clubs

Community clubs continue to be the life blood of the sport and we are continuing to work with clubs and the volunteers to support and foster a more sustainable, inclusive, welcoming, and safe environment for the whole community game.

The current economic and social challenges Rugby League communities are facing persist. In addition to supporting clubs facing a variety of challenges daily we are providing more targeted interventions with clubs in the most deprived communities and with those looking to increase participation amongst the most under-represented groups.

The following initiatives are underway:

Club Accreditation

The RFL Club Accreditation is currently being reviewed by the Development Team to ensure our approach is consistent across development plans and club health checks. We are also streamlining the process enabling clubs to promote how they provide a safe and welcoming environment to participants

Club Development

We are working closely with the RFL Data and Insight team to gain more comprehensive and informative community club data. This ensures we can tailor support to each club's specific needs..

We have promoted Buddle in partnership with Sport England as the new and updated/ rebranded Club Matters. Further information can be found [HERE](#). We have continued to work with Substance, Sports Structures and Continuum Leisure,



who are partners via Sport England, undertaking consultation and surveys across the community game to ensure that we are working in a more focused way to provide the support needed. Club updates are issued regularly keeping all community clubs updated on issues affecting the community game.

Development Plans

Clubs are continuing to access support and complete the health checks and development plans on a regular basis. There are over 60 community clubs that have these in place to steer development priorities. We have over 100 clubs who have completed the health checks. These checks provide a quick and easy tool which allows the Clubs and Development Team to assess and provide recommendations relating to club management, participation growth, and long-term sustainability.

Governance and Administration

The Delivery Team remains focussed on improving consistency of competition rules and removing the barriers to participation. A significant workstream that emerged at the end of 2023 and will continue throughout 2024 is the implementation of the Brain Health Committee recommendations. These recommendations have already been approved and work is underway with key stakeholders where further review is required during 2024.

The goals are to ensure that our playing offers protect players, support inclusivity, guard against over and under playing, provide windows of opportunity to engage in different playing opportunities, and limit conflict between the various offers.

Community Board

The Community Board is a sub-committee of the RFL Board and is accountable to the Board for the management and development of all aspects of the community, grassroots, and amateur game elements of Rugby League.

Three long-standing Community Board members who have served the community game with great distinction, Peter Moran, Damian Clayton MBE and Jan Robinson, stepped down at the end of December. Interviews for new Community Board Members are scheduled for early 2024.

Our League Active

The monies raised by this vital membership will ensure we can keep running and developing the community game for the sport. We provide updates to the Community Board on a regular basis and provided updates through these 'More than a Sport' reports to the whole community game.

In 2023 we estimated that it costs more than £900,000 to service the community game. This is an increase from when we launched the scheme. As agreed by the Community Board and announced recently, there will be small fee increases in 2024 which will not only contribute to the servicing of the community game but also to the cost of insurance which has increased significantly and would previously have been the responsibility of clubs to meet.

We continued to promote to players the benefit of engaging with the Our League app in 2023 to predict scores, vote on player of the match etc. giving the option to use any points generated to redeem against their fee. This is known as Rewards4. We are pushing out the benefits of Rewards4 at our pre-season meetings and on our social media channels.

Southern Regional Development Forum Update

During 2023 four Regional Development Forum stakeholder groups were formed across the Southern Regions, London and South East, Midlands, West of England, and South West, to support the RFL to continue to develop the community game in the South of the country. Each group met three times and are made up of 36 voluntary members representing multiple stakeholder groups or areas across the sport of Rugby League.

In the first year, the primary focus has been on implementing the groups, comprehending and refining processes, and fostering collaboration between the groups. Additionally, a Southern Regions Volunteer Action Plan has been

crafted, encompassing all facets of the sport, and aligning with the broader RFL National Volunteer Strategy. This strategic approach aims to enhance the organisation's structure, efficiency, and volunteer engagement across the Southern Regions.

Another component that has been invaluable is the cross regional groups working together to develop programmes and processes. This will provide local and regional insights to help shape future delivery. A Southern Competition Management Group was also formed supporting the delivery of the open age Men's competition, rejuvenating, and realigning the structures across the South. This saw reintroduction of the Harry Jepson Trophy and Southern Open Age Men's Representative programme.

In 2024, the groups will pivot their focus towards implementing the Volunteer Action Plan, establishing, and executing objectives to enhance the profile of the sport in the South. The agenda also includes conducting audits for each region, using 2023 as a baseline, and initiating the development of tailored Regional Development Plans for each specific region. This strategic approach aims to systematically enhance the visibility, structure, and development of Rugby League in the Southern Regions.

Community Game Environments

Enjoy the Game Update

The campaign's objective is to deliver a safe and inclusive sport for all to "Enjoy the Game". This has been measured as follows:

Reduction in Match Official abuse

In 2022 there were around 200 cases relating to Match Official abuse within the community game. In 2023 it is pleasing to note that the number of cases has decreased to 108 as detailed below.

- 78 involved players
- 20 involved volunteers (coaches)
- 10 involved spectators

Improved behaviour of touchlines in the community game

There were 817 off-field misconduct cases in the community game in 2022. The aim was to see no more than a 10% increase on these figures in 2023.

- At the end of the 2023 season, there were 590 misconduct cases in the community game which is a reduction of 28%.

Improved behaviour of coaches and players within the community game

The data on the number of coaches and players appearing at disciplinary hearings for poor behaviour is included within the figure above.

Improved behaviours in crowds at professional clubs

- In 2023 there were 25 cases (2 crowd misconduct unacceptable language and behaviour) which is a 44% reduction when compared to 2022 where there were 45 cases. The aim was to reduce this number by 20% in 2023.

Whilst the number of cases has reduced there is still a need to continue to promote the Respect Code of Conduct and continue to monitor misconduct cases.

In 2024 we will be changing the campaign's name to Respect and will be rolling out more resources to promote positive environments.

Introduction of head cams

We distributed 200 head cams to referee societies at the start of the season. These are now prevalent in the community game and used as part of misconduct hearings.

We recently conducted a survey of all match officials to gain greater insight into the introduction of the head cams. Only 79 officials responded which is disappointing.

The main feedback from the survey was:

- On average headcams are worn 1-2 times a week.
- The main issues were the batteries/SD cards.
- All agreed that the use of head cams was a great development tool.

There is frustration that match officials, despite being provided with a head cam, have not worn these, with a lack of information given as to why. The societies were given the responsibility of cascading the head cams to officials within their society, however it appears that we need to review this to ensure that match officials understand their role and responsibilities. When given a head cam to wear these should form part of their match official kit.

On a more positive note, the league discipline panels have seen a change in behaviour when dealing with cases and find the use of footage helpful during hearings. They would like more games to be covered to aid the discipline process.

Parent workshops

Minds Matter conducted a series of workshops with parents to address inappropriate behaviours and language seen on touchlines. Each session resulted in parents creating a code of behaviour they wish to adhere to. The feedback received has been positive.

The take up has not been as good as we would have hoped from community clubs, with sessions delivered to only 24 clubs. However, we do believe they had the desired outcome which was to get parents to consider their own behaviours and those around them on touchlines.

Education

Education is a vital area in terms of attracting new participants and providing an opportunity to reach participants who may otherwise never get to experience the sport. The season within the education sector mirrors the academic years.

Schools

Local school activity began again in September, 4 weeks after the culmination of the 2022-2023 season which officially finished with the boy's Y7 inspiresport Champion Schools Final which was played as a curtain-raiser to the events at Wembley Stadium on 12th August. Archbishop Sentamu were the winners on the day, but we will remember the day more for the wonderful scenes at the end of the game where the players from the winning team rushed to console their beaten opponents from Bedford High School before celebrating their own success on the biggest stage.

The 22-23 school season provided us with many other memorable moments, not least the first stand-alone final in the Girl's Champion Schools competition which was played as a curtain raiser on the Saturday of Magic Weekend at St James' Park, Newcastle. The Year 10 teams from The Brooksbank School and Ysgol Glantaf provided us with a great start to the weekend, but it was Brooksbank's Lil Seal who was the gamebreaker, running in 3 tries and converting all her team's tries.

The main finals day at St James Park also produced some excellent performances and close games. The 2023-2024 competition is mapped out and regional activity is underway in all areas. The Y7 boys final will remain at Wembley, and the Y10 Girls final will be played alongside a Women's Super League fixture (due to the movement of Magic Weekend).

We will supplement our flagship competition once again with our Inspired By 9s competition which saw a 50% increase in participation at local festivals in 2023, instigated by funding into Foundations via our Development Plans. We also introduced a Southern Finals event to provide equality of opportunity for our participating schools in Midlands and Southern Regions to experience an RFL run finals festival and their own chance of success. There are plans to expand the Southern coverage in 2024 by engagement with additional delivery partners and collaboration with London Youth Games.



College and University

Boy's College competitions began once again with a grading phase to allocate appropriate League positions to all participating colleges following consultation with college staff. In addition to regular league fixtures, 9s events have been hosted by colleges in the North West and Yorkshire to support newly recruited players. The first round of the Cup began before the Christmas break.

The girl's College season began with a Development Day in September at Cronton College attended by 8 teams and has continued with bi-weekly competitions held across the North West and Yorkshire. Teams receive points for attending and placing in the festivals, aiming for a top 4 spot at the end of the season to qualify for the play-offs.

The men's University 2023-2024 season opened with the Championship 9s competition at Nottingham Trent University, where 10 out of a possible 12 teams participated in a closely contested event. The Trophy 9s will be held as the closing event of the 2023-2024 season alongside a Women's event at York St John University.

Off field, our BUCS RL co-ordinator Maz Veater has been key to improvements in relationships between the RFL and key University stakeholders. This relationship has created much-needed sustainability in the men's leagues, and increased interest in women's teams who for the first time, played in a bespoke RFL funded Women's University League over the winter. 6 teams have taken part, and the season will finish with a play-off series and final in March 2024.

The Introduction to Teaching Rugby League courses are once again underway with the new cohorts of PGCE students. The course is delivered to ITE students completing postgraduate teaching qualifications, and therefore the next generation of the PE workforce in schools. In December we delivered to both Primary and Secondary PE trainees at the University of Brighton for the first time, taking our quota of partnered Universities to 11.

Social Impact

Supporting our people and communities is a fundamental part of who we are. We are working to become more inclusive by expanding our disability offers, and more diverse by supporting our clubs to become more representative of the communities within which they are based.

The following update is split into three strands in line with the newly developed Social Impact Reporting Framework:

- Tackle Inequalities
- Be Inclusive
- Be Sustainable

The strands contribute to our overall aim of being 'More than a Sport' and having a meaningful and measurable impact on improving people's lives by influencing wider social outcomes. Each strand is broken down into two or three themes.

We want to positively influence the social mobility of our community using the power of Rugby League through a visible and trusted organisation. We want long term sustainability for Rugby League to continue to be the catalyst for generating positive effects on people and communities on and off the pitch. We will be one of the UK's leading sports in this area.

STRAND 1 – Tackle Inequalities

Supporting our people and communities through tackling the inequalities and barriers that exist within the society that drives us is key for increasing personal development and social mobility.

Theme 1 – Education & Employability

Tackle OuRLife (Community Employability & Skills Programme)

Following the mid-year report, we have now secured a collaboration with a strategic funding partner SCL Education Group. 12 Foundations are now building contracts with SCL Education Group creating a potential sustainable funding

stream totalling over £540,000 per year for this programme. All Foundations have the option to opt-into the programme and create a bespoke model for 2024 and beyond, as we see this as a long-term sustainable programme. A full media launch will be completed before March 2024. The programme will start September 2024.

Programme details include targeting 16–18-year-olds within our Rugby League community to achieve qualifications that support their journey into work. The programme will go beyond the completion of academic qualifications but also develop skills, knowledge, and confidence to achieve greater life outcomes. It has been developed in response to widely available evidence suggesting young people growing up in areas of high deprivation are more likely to face challenges with their mental health, attain lower education grades and become unemployed in later life. This inequality gap has only increased following the Covid-19 pandemic. Rugby League will use its power and position in society to create a collaborative intervention, in a safe environment for learning that empowers young people to develop new practical skills, personal attributes and act as a catalyst for achieving improved social mobility.

Youth Endowment Fund

Since the mid-year report we are working closely with Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) and IPSOS (the new evaluation partner for the project), to co-design a Rugby League specific programme. The proposal will be assessed in March 2024 for a January 2025 start. The Foundation landscape will be delivery partners of the programme, again driving their sustainability whilst creating social impact.

In July 2023 an independent evaluation report was published by Manchester Metropolitan University on the Inspiring Futures Educate Mentoring Programme the YEF piloted with the RFL RFL-YEF-Feasibility-and-Pilot-Study-2023.pdf (youthendowmentfund.org.uk). The new programme details will be built from the evaluation of the pilot that included aims to improve children's wellbeing, resilience, social relationships and confidence while building their awareness of risky behaviours. In the long term, the pilot programme hoped this would lead to a reduction in offending and substance use and an increase in engagement in education. In the pilot, seven Rugby League Foundations delivered the Educate Mentoring programme, a 12-week programme which targeted 11-14 year olds. The sessions, delivered by Rugby League Foundation coaches, were typically provided in school, lasted two hours, and comprised of a mentoring session followed by physical activity. The topics covered included self-control, drug and alcohol awareness, healthy lifestyles, self-esteem and goal setting for the future. Participants also completed an accredited SLQ Young Leaders award as part of the intervention. 'At risk' young people were selected for the Inspiring Futures sessions by schools, which targeted children with poor behaviour and attendance with an interest in sport. The report found 218 people took part in the pilot programme.

Theme 2 – Health & Wellbeing

Community Wellbeing Hubs

There has been progress on the project since the mid-year report including a further 10 community clubs completing their Community Wellbeing Hub (CWH) inductions and now working to be fully established. One community club had a successful launch day in November. The club is now part of the CWH landscape with 6 fully established CWHs who are driving social impact in their local community whilst creating a more sustainable future for the community club by generating income and increased usage without compromising the playing of Rugby League. In 2023 we have also set up an Our Learning Zone resource, the Community Wellbeing Hub Network, for shared learnings and had a media launch. We also secured a commercial partner for the project to support the CWHs launch days.

In 2024, each established CWH will be receiving an accreditation plaque. We will continue to work with the 6 established CWHs, the 9 clubs who have completed their inductions to launch and the 23 clubs who have expressed an interest to start the process.

Lead the Game (Veterans Foundation Charity)

We are working with a small number of Foundations and a project lead from the Match Officials Department for the delivery of this project. Due to the project suffering some disruption due to launching in 2021 when some Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were still in place, we are working with the Veterans Foundation to continue the project into 2024 to deliver all targets. This includes 90 veterans completing a Match Official course, but also to support the participants' mental wellbeing and offer mentoring opportunities for personal development. To support this, we have developed a promotional video with Jack Smith (Match Official and Ex-Armed Forces) to signpost people to the Foundations sign up links. We will continue to monitor this project over the next few months.

STRAND 2 – Be Inclusive

We will become even more inclusive through expanding our disability sports offers and become more diverse through supporting our clubs to become more representative of the communities within which they are based. We need to make it as easy as possible for people to get involved, by providing various flexible opportunities on and off field and promoting the benefits in engaging.

Theme 1 – Inclusive Playing Offers

In 2023 the disability centric variants of Rugby League have seen further unprecedented growth with more individuals engaging across all three. There are now over 1,000 participants across the disability variants, and we have seen an average 65% growth across all 3 variants, when compared with the end of 2022 registrations. As such we have employed a new joined up approach to the practical application of delivery of the variants which has created bigger events, better experiences and greater social impact, whilst also acknowledging the bespoke and nuanced differences between all variants and giving each their own space and platform to develop as individual offers.

Learning Disability Rugby League

Learning Disability Rugby League, including the Community Integrated Care Learning Disability Super League (LDSL) offer has again developed with a 22% increase in participation/registrations totalling just under 400 participants. The LDSL has been adapted to make the festivals more accessible and in the main activity has become regionalised. There are 2 national events which all participants and foundations are invited to play in and celebrate the sport together, which are centrally delivered. One of these events being the Magic Weekend in Newcastle and the other, the Final Festival of the year, in Manchester. All other events were foundation led and geographically considered meaning travel costs and expenses for all are reduced. In addition to these developments, the Inclusive Volunteering Programme has seen an increase in opportunities to be part of the sport through diverse volunteering opportunities within the game.

Physical Disability Rugby League

The Physical Disability format of Rugby League (PDRL) has again developed creating new, more equitable, ways to engage with the sport for its participants. It has also seen a 70% increase in participation when compared with 2022. As such the season has become more robust with 9 festivals and 9 participating teams/foundations spread out through the year, three of which are centrally delivered maximising the opportunity to create a social impact as well as raise the standards of the events. This year, we have also seen one of these festivals being at the Magic Weekend with a return to an on-field exhibition game at St James' Park.

Additional to the regular domestic offer, the representative programme has expanded and grown. The programme has developed to be more inclusive and accessible to all participants who have been through the classification process. It is now an opportunity to develop a larger base of players that fit this process, give confidence to participants of relevant impairments and give a much more equitable playing offer through classification. This year there has been two tests between Wales and England, one hosted by each of the nations.

Wheelchair Rugby League

Notably, participation has increased by 74% when compared with the 2022 registration figures. The domestic season has seen changes across all levels with more teams participating more regularly than ever before. This year has seen a structure of three divisions of participation from the elite Super League down to multiple regionalised divisions to aid in fixture completion and cost with a national Championship League. Events have also increased in standards holistically with 4 "Magic Rounds" hosted centrally delivered in strategically targeted regions, away from traditional areas of Rugby League, in a bid to capitalise on the success and visibility of the RLWC2021. These rounds host all 6 Super League teams at one venue on the same day and as such 3 of these were streamed on the Sportsman bringing the number of league games streamed this year up to 9 in total. Additionally, the Challenge Trophy and Cup competitions have this year seen an increased level of participation with 14 teams engaging across both, with a finals day at Sheffield EIS for both games. The Challenge Cup was streamed via the BBC, again bringing greater visibility to the sport with the Grand Final broadcast by Sky. Through the Created By fund, in 2021-2022 with match funding from applicants, just short of £500,000 has been invested into kit and equipment.



The greatest challenge that has been evidenced this year, and all years previously, has been around appropriate participation in our disability inclusive variants. However, we are now in a position where, both philosophically and practically, we can influence change and add stronger governance to this area. Through defining appropriate participation, we will see more equitable opportunities to participate in the sport. This will give those who the variants were initially developed for greater visibility, confidence and accessibility in participation and allow for greater performance opportunities for those participants who want this. These models will be introduced and applied to the elite end of participation and subsequently education offered to appropriate stakeholders to facilitate the management of the structures. The focus for 2024 is to create more significant aspirational offers that increase visibility and meaningful, competitive, engagement opportunities for the participants, in turn growing all levels of participation and flooding the grass roots offers with participants.

Theme 2 – Representative of our Communities

In 2023 we have worked with our Data Team and GameDay to gather data insight into our community game landscape in terms of the community clubs who are the most and least representative of their community.

In 2024, we will use this as a baseline measure with targeted and bespoke projects encouraging clubs to become more representative of their community, with a focus on culturally diverse communities, lower-socio economic groups and women & girls.

During 2023 we have worked in partnership with BARA (British Asian Rugby Association) working alongside Ikram Butt focusing on the South Asian Community in three local authority areas: Leeds, Bradford, and Kirklees. The partnership will support clubs in being more accessible and welcoming to a new and broader community user group. Building on this we have also started some work in Bolton working with a school which has a 95% Asian community.

Tackle It

In 2023 our Inclusion Lead at the RFL has updated the Tackle It Action Plan and we will continue to support the implementation during 2024.

STRAND 3 – Be Sustainable

We will maximise Rugby League's proven ability to deliver positive social impact through 'OurLeague Life', the RFL's social impact brand. Social impact programmes demonstrate our reach and relevance and are a major part of the sport's sustainable future. This strand links closely with the game wide objectives of Sustainability & Economic Development and Governance.

Theme 1 – Community Game Sustainability

RFL Central Foundation

Significant progress has been made for the development of a central charitable entity set up by the RFL and was approved by the RFL Board in September 2023. The Foundation is a game changing opportunity co-created by the RFL and the sport's Charitable Community Organisations (CCOs) with an objective of securing new funding for the delivery of 'Rugby League inspired' community programmes that achieve real social impact and protect the long-term sustainability of the CCO network. The Foundation will be used by the RFL to respond to publicised funding opportunities on a regional and national level that are seeking to invest funds into consortia led by an organisation registered with the Charity Commission. It represents an important expansion of the RFL's support offer to CCOs, meeting an identified gap in coverage that in recent years has prevented the sport accessing funds for the delivery of projects that proposed using Rugby League as a catalyst for tackling wider socio-economic inequalities. The development of the Foundation is currently on-going and is hoping to launch mid-2024.

Foundation Sustainability Network

The first year of the Foundation Sustainability Network (FSN) has seen four quarterly meetings as a collaborative forum involving RFL development colleagues and five nominated Foundation (CCOs) leaders. It has focused on supporting the long-term growth and sustainability of CCO's across three core aims of Foundation Health, Governance and Showcasing. The FSN ignites shared learnings and feedback directly from our Foundations that has shaped project planning and delivery this year. In 2024, the FSN will continue with the same Foundation representatives.

Foundation Support

The Foundation landscape has also been supported in 2023 through an annual Foundation Needs Analysis Survey to highlight the current needs, focuses, future needs and shared learnings. The feedback from this has been vital in shaping the priorities of support this year. We are looking forward to gathering and analysing the 2024 Needs Analysis Survey that will be completed in February 2024.

We have also developed a Foundation Mentor Scheme in 2023, as an informal, optional network where Foundations who are looking for support in a specific area is paired with a successful Foundation with relevant experience. This allows sharing of successes, challenges and any top tips that can be shared across the network – something we are looking to further develop in 2024.

The use of Upshot for all Foundations receiving Development Plan funding for 2023 has been vital for data collection and analysis. This has allowed full monitoring and evaluation of the RFL Development Plan projects, but also a tool for the Foundations to use for their own project reporting. This is another method allowing us to gain further insight into the Foundation landscape, for learnings and to shape future support. In 2024, we will continue our Upshot license for mandatory RFL Development Plan reporting but encourage the use of it for the Foundations' own strategy and development plans tracking. This will allow greater understanding into the landscape and will provide further opportunity to evidence activity for IMG community gradings.

All four Foundation Forums across the year have been successful to deliver key RFL updates, but also to encourage networking between the foundations informally and at break out tables on a topic suggested by the network. We have found positive feedback from the forums particularly on the breakout table shared learnings opportunity and guest speakers from outside of the sport. This will continue in 2024.

Finally, we are continuing to work with independent evaluators investigating and showcasing the impact of Foundation projects. In 2023 we have worked with Manchester Metropolitan University to evaluate Sky Try and they have finalised the report showing economic impact of Sky Try was £15.77m, its social impact was £32.04m and its social return on investment (SROI) was £3.12, i.e., each £1 invested led to a social return of £3.12. Overall, 758,184 children took part in the programme, minimum of 16,896 of them sustained participation and 95% of the 16,896 children benefited from the positive outcomes evaluated (socialising more/making new friends and increased confidence).

Grant Funding

The below funds have closed this year with full monitoring and evaluation completed:

The Together Fund (previously Tackling Inequalities Fund) closed on 31st March 2023 with the total £375,000 of the fund distributed directly into community game organisations. Monitoring and evaluation for future learnings is underway.

The Rugby League Survival Fund successfully distributed the total £1,501,500 of the fund into the community game across 191 awards.

Created By Small Grants Scheme has now closed and all funding allocated.

The RFL Environmental Sustainability Action Plan will be embedded within the Community Rugby League Strategy. A new Environmental Sustainability Strategy will be put in place during 2024 and again we will ensure it is factored in across the community game as appropriate.

Theme 2 – Volunteers

Volunteer Strategy

In 2023 we have delivered on the commitment to create a National Volunteer Strategy. The strategy comprises four key areas of volunteer support (GROW, DEVELOP, VALUE, DIVERSIFY) and sets out our ambitions for volunteering. A roadmap for delivery, annual action plan and baseline measures underpin this strategy and provide the building blocks for success.

Volunteer Data

5,759 volunteers registered for the 2023 season. Of these volunteers, 54% are male and 46% are female. 6% of these volunteers have a disability and 92% of the volunteer base are white with no other ethnicity making up more than 1%. 45% of our volunteers are aged between 36 and 45 with 83% being between the ages of 26 and 55. 35% of the volunteer base are from the top 30% most deprived communities by IMD, 14% were from the lowest 20% of deprived communities. This data will be used to monitor the impact of targeted projects and initiatives in 2024 and beyond.

Volunteer Portal & Central Volunteer Workforce (TryForce)

Development of our online volunteer portal continued in 2023. 359 volunteers have used the portal to sign up for events. In 2023 over 25 RFL community game and development events were supported by volunteers recruited via the RFL volunteer portal. These volunteers will be united to form a central volunteer team for the 2024 season under the name TryForce. As part of the volunteer strategy, work has also started on a project to recruit more volunteers to the portal that will be fully developed and delivered in 2024. This forms part of a wider plan to have community clubs use the portal to assist with their volunteer recruitment and builds on the 78 opportunities in 2023 that were accessed by volunteers.

Rugby League World Cup 2021 Community Volunteering Project

To capitalise on increased volunteer interest generated by the 2021 RLWC we ran a foundation lead recruitment project to support the delivery of disability and girls Rugby League. The project quickly gained momentum after a slow start and engaged 15 Foundations to recruit and develop Disability RL volunteers and 14 Foundations for RugBees. Overall, 19 Foundations are participating with 89 new volunteers recruited or identified to be recruited. With all grants now distributed, a case study video highlighting the benefits of the programme and showcasing the variety of volunteer roles available in Rugby League will be produced in 2024.

Theme 3 – Facilities

Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund

This is now fully operational, and we have had the first few clubs draw down funding from this. Support is available for both revenue and capital projects that help clubs to enhance or sustain the quality of their grass pitches.

Year to Date	Overall	£1,357,083.18
	Revenue	£811,520.00
	Capital	£272,573.40
	Match Funding	£272,989.78
Financial Year End	Overall	£1,947,458
	Match Funding	£389,491

Initial concerns are that as the fund begins to taper, clubs struggle to fulfil their contribution and investment into pitches gradually declines. Actions being taken to ensure sustainable financial plans are in place as part of the application/ approval process.

The challenges around lack of security of tenure are preventing the investment going into the community game. We are working with the Football Foundation and other partners to tackle this issue.

Next Steps:

- Communicate the opportunity throughout the community game.
- Refine application process to ensure clubs can contribute.
- Execute a co-ordinated and strategic approach with the Grounds Management Association to get more clubs receiving funding (this focuses on key Local Authorities and clubs 'at risk').



THE NATIONAL LOTTERY

RUGBY LEAGUE WORLD CUP ENGLAND 2021

THE NATIONAL LOTTERY

THE NATIONAL LOTTERY

RUGBY LEAGUE WORLD CUP ENGLAND 2021

THE NATIONAL LOTTERY

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RUGBY LEAGUE WORLD CUP ENGLAND 2021

THE NATIONAL LOTTERY

Kapten

THE POWER'S SQUAD

RUGBY LEAGUE WORLD CUP ENGLAND 2021
6
ANDREW GALLIE
RUGBY LEAGUE

MARVIS

RUGBY LEAGUE

RUGBY LEAGUE WORLD CUP ENGLAND 2021

INDEPENDENT TRAFFIC CONTROL
ittraffic.co.nz

RUGBY LEAGUE WORLD CUP ENGLAND 2021

RUGBY LEAGUE

RFL Community Game Facilities Strategy

The new RFL Community Facilities Strategy will be published in the first quarter of 2024 with the expectation it will be the catalyst for further investment.

Playzones

Projects are being explored in key areas for Rugby League including – Leeds, Bradford, Oldham, Rochdale, Newcastle, Manchester, Salford, Wigan, and Hull. It is key for us to work with Foundations in these areas on how they can activate these Playzones and maximise the opportunity for Rugby League.

In some areas Playzones may provide suitable facilities for small sided, well-lit training sessions but the idea is they lean more towards unstructured play rather than formal organised sport.

Football Foundation - Multi-Sport Investment

There are several projects where Rugby League is being included as a partner in the programme of use on new 3G facilities including across the Leeds Hub sites and the 3G refurbishment at Newton le Willows Health & Fitness.

Other clubs potentially benefitting; Sherwood Wolf Hunt, Oldham St Annes, Higginshaw, Birkenshaw Blue Dogs, Accrington Wildcats, Wallsend Eagles, Wallsend Centurions, Newton Storm, Hunslet.

Work is ongoing to consider how we could implement more hybrid pitches following implementation at Thatto Heath and Siddal.

We are monitoring the effects of the microplastics ban and what impact this will have on community facilities.

Other areas for consideration in 2024:

- Sustainable solutions for pitch watering rather than mains
- Access to school sites for community use to meet needs of clubs requiring floodlit training
- Quality control of contractors ensuring the facilities and services delivered as a result of funding are of an acceptable standard.

Social Impact 2030 Targets Summary

- 1. Develop 10 partnerships across a diverse range of sectors, including health and well-being.**
- 6 in 2023.
- 2. Establish a network of 30 Our League Life Community Hubs, delivering positive social impact into the heart of our communities.**
- 6 fully established.
- 9 in the induction phase.
- 3. Reach 3,000 participants taking part in Inclusion forms of the sport including Wheelchair RL, Learning Disability RL, and Physical Disability RL by 2030.**
- 1,118 in 2023.
- 4. Meet all the targets and measures within the Tackle It action plan relating to players and volunteers.**
In 2023 the Tackle It action plan has been updated by the Inclusion lead that we will now work closely with to:
- Increase the representation of ethnically diverse players to 7% of the total playing population by 2025
- 5. Support a minimum of 30 community clubs in Rugby League's most ethnically diverse areas to encourage more participants from diverse backgrounds.**
A baseline measure for community clubs who are within the most ethnically diverse areas but are the least representative of their community has been established. This will be and the information needed to support those least representative with targeted and bespoke projects encouraging clubs to become more representative of their community.

- 6. Generate £2m of additional income for the wider sport to deliver social impact programmes by 2030.**
 - £195,429 in 2023 (£321,928 in total for the 2022-2030 period so far).
- 7. Deliver £15m of facilities development funding to better support/enable the delivery of social impact programmes and build stronger communities.**
 - £1,515,994 of facilities funding invested during 2023.
- 8. Introduce 1000 volunteers supporting individual development and improving physical and mental health.**
 - An 816 increase in 2023 from 4,943 to 5,75

