

Community Rugby League MORE THAN A SPORT REVIEW MID-YEAR 2023



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Executive Summary

- The numbers of active participants who participate in community club's settings are up 4% compared to the mid-point in 2022.
- The RLWC2021 contributed to a significant increase in the numbers of females playing rugby league (up 28%) and taking part in inclusive playing offers (up 51%) at the midpoint.
- Community Rugby League at male open age is facing challenges with concerns over the number of teams withdrawing from structured competition.
- Reducing the rates and risks of concussion and sub-concussive events through a clear action plan is a priority for the organisation.
- The social offers of Rugby League including non, limited and minimal contact have become more of an integral part of Rugby League's active participants in 2023.
- New and enlarged programmes continue to drive growth in the numbers of girls playing the sport for the first time.
- We are now entering Phase 3 of the Women and Girls Strategy which launched in 2017 and will see continued evolution of a full national pyramid.
- The current financial climate is challenging for clubs who we continue to support on a daily basis through a variety of initiatives.
- We are working with 28 Foundations who are supporting the delivery of Area Development Plans.
- Projects and initiatives designed to improve touchline behaviours and environments have resulted in a slight reduction in the number of misconduct cases.
- Participation numbers across education settings have increased in 2022-2023.
- We continue to work on programmes designed to increase 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 under-represented groups.
- As part of our drive to build stronger communities we are encouraging clubs to become environmentally sustainable and this forms a key part of our decision making.
- We have delivered against our obligation to create a new Volunteer Strategy
- With the ongoing support of Sport England and the Football Foundation we continue to ensure community clubs can access facilities funding.

Introduction

Welcome to the Mid-Year 2023 Community Rugby League Update. This update summarises the activity undertaken by the Development Team contributing to the RFL Strategy and Vision 2022-2030.

The Community Strategy & Vision 2022-2030 is available on the RFL website and can be found [here](#).

This includes a focus on three key areas: -

- Supporting our core community game participants and clubs
- Delivering broad and flexible pathways in education
- Tackling inequalities and having a positive social impact

Before looking at these three areas in detail please see below an update on the numbers of active rugby league participants post RLWC2021, Brain Health and the staffing structure within the RFL Development Team.

Active Participant Updates

The data outlined below will be significant as it represents the first full set of reporting since delivery of the RLWC2021 during November 2022.

The last update published at the end of December included the first full year of reporting post pandemic. Whilst there had been no collapse in participation post covid the early optimism that the sport would bounce back to post pandemic levels by the end of 2022 proved premature. The final 2022 reporting evidenced a more cautious return in education activity and a decline in male open age players. However, we continued to see strong growth in the women and girls' game and of the numbers participating in primary junior and youth settings.

The RLWC2021, rightly billed as the most inclusive World Cup ever, provided the Development Team with a significant opportunity to increase participation and maintain the accelerated growth we have seen, particularly through the number of women and girls and participants with a disability taking up the sport. As the community game was out of season targeted activity was put in place before, during, and after the tournament in the run up to the 2023 season.

As with every major tournament there is a focus on whether the hosting of a major event has resulted in a positive legacy in terms of participation increase. The focus for the 2023 season is to continue the momentum and maximise the impact of the RLWC2021 with much of the activity, including new initiatives, delivered in partnership with the professional club Foundations.

A summary of the initial data findings below:

Core Community Breakdown

Core Community - Age / Gender						
Core Indicators	Baseline	Year 2 - 22/23		Year 3 - 23/24		% Difference
		Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year
U7 to U11 (Primary)	12,000	13,030	13,610	13,615		4%
Boys		11,682	12,197	11,809		1%
Girls		1,348	1,413	1,806		34%
U12 to U15 (Junior)	9,400	10,870	11,048	11,579		7%
Boys		9,235	9,359	9,272		0%
Girls		1,635	1,689	2,307		41%
U16 to U18 (Youth)	4,800	5,266	5,448	5,226		-1%
Boys		4,435	4,559	4,463		1%
Girls		831	889	763		29%
Open Age	18,099	10,800	11,503	11,085		3%
Men		9,575	10,140	9,502		-1%
Women		1,225	1,363	1,583		29%
Totals Male	0	34,927	36,255	35,046		0%
Total Female	0	5,039	5,354	6,459		28%
TOTAL		39,966	41,609	41,505		4%

Women & Girls

August Report (STG + Upshot)	
Age Group	Female
Primary (U7 to U11)	1,806
Youth (U12 to U15)	2,307
junior (U16 to U18)	763
Open Age	1,583
Total	6,459

Age

- Primary Age is up 4% vs Mid-Year 2022
- Junior Age is up 7% vs Mid-year 2022
- Youth is down -1% vs Mid-year 2022
- Open Age is up 3% vs Mid-year 2022

Gender

- Male is down by less than 1% vs mid-year 2022
- Female is up 28% vs Mid-year 2022

Age/Gender

- Primary Age, both genders are up vs mid-year 2022
- Junior Age Girls are up 41% vs mid-year 2022 – (in the main attributed to the introduction of Rugby's and growth of the Futures Programmes)
- Open Age Women are up 28% vs mid-year 2022

Overall: Up 4% vs mid-year 2022 in core community club settings

Inclusive Playing Offers

Core Indicators	Year 2 - 2022		Year 3 - 2022		Mid-Year 22 to 23
	Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	End of Year	Difference
Physical Disability RL	153	155	247		61%
Learning Disability RL	303	318	372		23%
Wheelchair	236	269	427		81%
Totals	692	742	1,046		51%

We have seen a significant increase in participants across all three inclusive playing offers with increases ranging from 23% to 81% averaging out at a 51% increase at the mid-point of the year. Clearly we have seen a significant bounce post RLWC2021. This has been driven not only by the World Cup but also the ongoing support of Sport England.

Whilst we do not run reporting mid-year for our Social and Education activity initial indicators suggest activity in both settings will be higher than in 2022 when the end of year reporting is run at the end of the year. Overall, the data trends suggest there will be no immediate bounce back to pre-pandemic highs in terms of participation, but we have returned to year-on-year growth with accelerated growth in the women and girls settings and across our inclusive playing offers.

The data is in the main positive but there are still some key challenges facing community rugby league. The sport has bounced from a pandemic to a cost-of-living crisis. This has put additional pressures on clubs facing significant increased travel, utility, pitch maintenance costs etc and on players who may for example need to work more frequently at weekends. This along with some of the other challenges facing adult players will be looked at in more detail later.

We have also consistently reported during these updates that unacceptable behaviours both on and off the pitch continue to impact on our ability to retain participants. The indications from the first half of 2023 suggest that whilst there has been some improvement in behaviours on and off the pitch there is still much work to do. The RFL together with key stakeholders will continue to take whatever steps are necessary to improve environments as part of a wider culture change.

Brain Health

The RFL has worked closely on and agreed to implement the Concussion Guidelines for Grassroots Sport which were published by the [Government and Sport and Recreational Alliance at the end of April](#). We have taken responsibility for ensuring that the guidelines are embraced throughout Community Rugby League with the aim of ensuring participants will be better protected from the potentially serious effects of head injuries and concussion.

The guidelines, developed by an expert panel of domestic and international clinicians and academics in neurology and sports medicine, set out steps to improve understanding and awareness of the prevention and treatment of concussion in grassroots sport where trained medical professionals are less likely to be routinely present. They are targeted at people of all ages.

These are the first [UK-wide Concussion Guidelines for Grassroots Sport](#) which will help players, coaches, parents, schools, National Governing Bodies and sports administrators to identify, manage and prevent the issue. 'If in doubt, sit them out' is the strapline, making clear no-one should return to sport within 21 days of a suspected concussion at the earliest.

The RFL has also set up a Brain Health Committee which meets every month and includes representatives from the community game. The group is focused on reducing the rates and risk of concussion and sub concussive exposure. This will be achieved in part through a clear action plan which will likely include law changes, coach education and updated regulations and guidance. Other factors actively under consideration are contact loads and a mandated length off season.

Effectively, when it comes to reducing the chances of concussion there are some basic options. Firstly, we could play less. By reducing the amount of time, a participant plays the exposure to concussion would be reduced. Secondly, rules and laws could be amended to reduce the likelihood of head contact and concussion. We could also look at a combination of the two. We will also continue to educate all involved in the sport and the players to ensure they are making informed choices.

Whilst there is a clear need to accelerate change given the potential impact of concussion many of the potential changes will have wider development benefits increasing our ability to attract new and retain existing participants in greater numbers. It is also worth reiterating that the Whole Game Review carried out pre-covid made specific references to the need for culture change. The need for such change has been continually referenced in previous updates. Significantly reducing contact with the head should reduce potential flashpoints, improve touchline behaviours and reduce match official abuse.

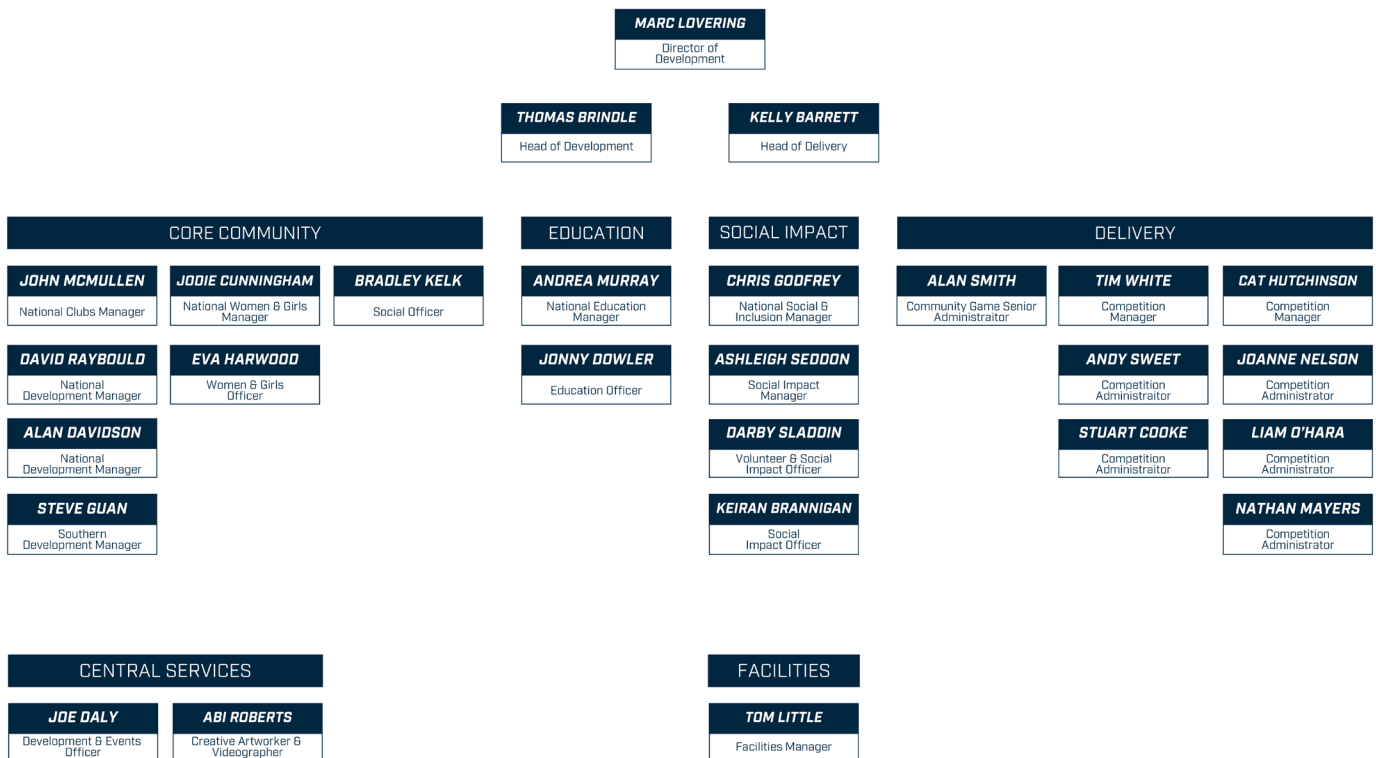
Part of the ongoing process has included the recent Academy Law Trials within which the rules were modified to try and reduce contact with the head during a tackle. Contact to the head is the leading cause of concussion so any reduction in head contact evidenced through trials like this would be significant across 1,000's of community games.

Another study has been designed to reduce head-on-head collisions in Women's Super League and the RFL Executive are working on a Head Contact Sanctioning Framework.

Development Team Staffing Structure Update

The RFL Development Team which had consisted of 18 Sport England funded staff has been strengthened by the inclusion of 9 Community Game Delivery Team members. The combined team now covers all aspects of developing and serving the community game.

THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM



As mentioned earlier our Community Rugby League Strategy & Vision 2022-2030 is focussed on three main areas, the first of which is:

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 change and an improvement in our environments.

Participant Growth

Ensuring we are player-centred driving growth and retention includes a commitment to ensuring we are providing appropriate playing offers and aspirational playing opportunities which includes representative rugby league and showcase events and finals.

Overall, we will be responsible for over 200+ events during 2023. Of these finals, 30+ will be showcase finals which means they will be appropriately resourced in regard to staffing, media, medals and venue dressing. We understand the difference enhanced events and finals, can have on the growth and development of our offers through providing aspirational playing opportunities,

Community Rugby League at male adult level is facing challenges. Even prior to the current cost of living crisis a change in working patterns, including requirements to work weekends and greater family commitments, has impacted on player availability. We need to ensure that all our competition structures meet the needs of players and reflects the various demands placed on them. We also need to recognise that clubs need more players to complete a season.

Our dedicated Delivery staff are focussed on delivering customer centric competitions to ensure we are providing appropriate playing offers and aspirational playing opportunities.

At this time of the year, depending on the region, some Competitions are ending, whilst others are reaching their last few rounds, leading to finals in October. July marked the start of the events season, so from then, through to the middle of October the Delivery Team will be busy delivering events across the country.

The NCL had a new title sponsor in Impact Performance coming on board. The Premier Division Grand Final will again be held at Featherstone Rovers over the weekend of 7th/8th October. Following on from games being shown on OurLeague, 4 games have been shown with more to be streamed at the end of the league season along with the Division 1 play-off Final and the Premier Division Grand Final.



The Yorkshire Men's League (YML) hosted 4 Cup Finals on Saturday 15th July at The Millennium Stadium, home of Featherstone Rovers. The day was a success with all 4 games being streamed via OurLeague, as they were in 2022. The end of season Playoff Finals will take place on the 30th September & 1st October at Horsfall Stadium in Bradford. This will see 4 games taking place over the 2 days.

The North West Men's League (NWML) delivered 3 Cup Finals, also on Saturday 15th July. The event was successfully hosted by Blackbrook ARLFC, and all games were streamed via OurLeague. The end of season Playoff Finals will take place on the 30th September & 1st October and will be hosted by Ince Rose Bridge in Wigan. This will see 5 games taking place over the 2 days.

Both the YML and NWML have conducted midseason reviews to reflect on the season to date, draw comparison to previous seasons, and start to think how any issues can be addressed ahead of the 2024 season.

From a YML perspective, indications are positive that come the end of the season we will see an increase in the number of registered players, active players, and games played. There are still concerns over the number of teams withdrawing from a structured division. As of the mid-point of the current season 10 teams had withdrawn from the Competition, this was the same as the mid-point of the 2022 season. We have also had further withdrawals since the mid-season review was conducted in July. As was the case last season, 2nd teams account for a disproportionately high number of games that are conceded.

The NWML has seen an increase in the number of active players when compared to the same period last season, in addition, the number of games that have taken place has also seen a slight increase. There is still room for improvement, as far as fixture completion is concerned, despite this being slightly higher than last season.

Looking ahead to 2024 both Competitions need to build on the robust entry criteria introduced at the start of the season, to try and ensure all teams involved in a structured division can complete all their scheduled fixtures. The majority of 2nd teams do struggle to complete fixtures regularly as player availability is clearly dictated by the needs of the respective 1st team, predominantly NCL.

Ahead of the current season both Competitions looked to introduce measures to improve fixture completion, as that was identified as one of the key metrics behind a competition's success. There were 2 avenues of approach, one being changes to competition structure and the other being changes to competition rules. Regarding structure, a thorough review of last season's playing offer took place, with the performance of each team reviewed against several metrics. There was a higher bar to entry set by each Management Group which resulted in some applications for a structured division being refused. New competition offers were introduced to also try and tackle the issue of 2nd teams incorporating large numbers of 1st team players and the negative impact that could have on competition integrity and player enjoyment. From a competition rules perspective consultation took place with Clubs which led to stricter sanctions being introduced, these included higher fines, additional points deductions, and the ability for Management Groups to act quicker, if a team was struggling with the fulfilment of fixtures.

The Southern Conference League will culminate with the Grand Final on 16th September, this will be hosted by Hemel Stags. This event will be a double header in conjunction with the Harry Jepson Final which has been reintroduced this season, having not been part of the calendar since before the pandemic. We have seen both North Herts and Bedford Tigers struggle in 2023 so we will work with them in the off season to see what support they require and whether they feel they will be able to compete in 2024.

The East of England and London Men's Leagues have now come to an end with the Grand Finals taking place at Hemel Stags and London Skolars respectively on Saturday 19th August. The London Men's League had a positive season, with the Premier Division being contested by 6 teams. Fixture completion was high and player registrations remained like 2022 levels. The East of England League, was not quite as positive, it was intended that 5 teams would contest the Premier Division, but fixture completion was below what we would have hoped. 2 of the 5 Premier Teams were SCL 2nd teams, so again, at times struggled to raise more than one team at the same time. The Midlands Men's League season also ended with a Grand Final on Saturday 19th August hosted by Leamington Royals; this event was a double header with the final of the Midlands Women's Super League. The Midlands Men's League, as it did last season, had a strong season. Fixture completion was high and player registrations were up.

The West of England and South West Leagues both had difficult seasons. Consultation is needed with the teams in each region to make an early start on plans and preparations for the 2024 season, so we can understand what a viable playing offer looks like. This has already begun as a meeting with the West of England teams having already taken place, and an equivalent meeting with the South West planned for the near future. The Southern Competition Group will help with shaping the playing offers for 2024 for the SCL and Southern Regional Divisions.

In the Barrow & District Youth Competition, following on from a successful 2022, fixture completion is again close to 100%. Both the U12s and U14s divisions are very competitive, with the league leaders and play off places likely only being decided in the last round. After the school holidays, the younger age groups will come back to three more festival rounds before the culmination of the season with a Primary RL festival at Craven Park (home of Barrow Raiders). The older age groups will come back for the last three regular rounds, followed by the Top 4 playoffs and Cup Finals. In the West Cumbria Youth League, fixture completion is also very high. 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 have finished the seasons, whilst the U12s and U14s comeback for league fixtures & Top 4 playoffs, plus their relevant Cup competitions.

We will be conducting end of season reviews with players and clubs in September to seek feedback on the season and any improvements that can be made.

In terms of Competitions that are not administered by the RFL a full review of the season will be referenced in the end of year report.



England Community Lions

This programme, which is a retention tool providing aspirational playing opportunities, engages with all community players and offers them an opportunity to represent their country.

The programme is looking to build on from a successful 2022 in which the U19's England Community Lions won the European Championship for the first time and the PDRL (Physical Disability Rugby League) team won the inaugural PDRL World Cup.

2023 began with further opportunities for all community players to represent their country.

Firstly, the U16, U17 & U18 programmes had over 400 player nominations and all players were invited to attend. These numbers were reduced to 2 x 60 player squads for trial games which took place in February. Following on from these trials the squads were further reduced to 20 players for each age group after the trials.

U16 - The U16 programme is a home nations tournament with games against Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, which will hopefully evolve into an annual tournament.

U17 - The U17 programme was to play two games against France. This year the two games were at home and next year we will travel to France to play them.

U18/U19 - This is a two-year programme for European Championships (2024). It started in January 2023 and will end in September 2024. It is an accumulation of the U17 & U18 programmes with mixed teams coming together from the U17 & U18 teams to play a final trial game on the 3rd February 2024, from which the U19 squad will be selected.

In 2023 the U18 squad played in a Home Nations tournament against Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This will happen every two years in between the European Championship years.

U19 - In November the U19 Lions will play Brazil Men, the Lions team will be made up from the U17 & U18 squads.

U23 - Following trials the Lions U23 team will play Ireland A and Wales Dragonhearts. The first of the three games will start with a double header with both the U23s and PDRL playing Wales on the 14th October followed by the 21st October against Ireland in Dublin and the 28th October against Wales in Port Talbot.

Men - The Mens programme has started to identify players to be part of the proposed 2024 tour to the Southern Hemisphere. The coaching staff have watched Presidents Cup games and players have been nominated by their community clubs, 3 development days have already taken place, with a further 3 to be held in September. Players will then be selected to play in a Reds v Blues game in November, this will be followed by an East v West game in February 2024 from which the train on squad will be selected for the 2024 tour.

Women - Development Day sessions have been held and players have been invited back for an additional session before the squad is picked for the first ever tour by an England Community Lions Womens team. The tour to Serbia, leaves on 7th October and returns on the 15th October with games on the 8th and 14th.

England Universities - This season saw the England University team go undefeated in the Presidents Cup and in the Student Four Nations. Following local trials six regional sides were picked, totalling 120 players, which was subsequently reduced to 40 players for Origin games after which the final squad of 20 players was announced.

England Student Women - The England Student Womens programme started with over 100 player nominations and after trials was reduced to the final squad of 20 players. The women retained the Presidents Cup winning both their games against the UK Armed Forces and the GB Teachers.

PDRL - After successfully winning the inaugural PDRL World Cup, as with all programmes, this was reviewed, and it was decided to have more development days to increase exposure to more players. There are two games to be held, the first one will be held on 2nd September against Wales away and the second one at home as part of a double header with the Lions U23's in October.



Masters – Masters Lionhearts programme has been introduced into the Lions Programme. Masters Lionhearts is based on reward and recognition for the players who have played and supported the Masters programme over a number of years. The Masters team play international games against home nation countries annually.

Programme Wide

Wellbeing is also a big part of our programme with Rugby League Cares delivering Self Care and other workshops, including social media, sleep, nutrition, and gratitude to the players at each session. We also delivered the UKAD workshop and concussion workshop to the 120 U16, U17 and U18 players that made the final trials.

Social Rugby League

The social variants of Rugby League including non, limited, and minimal contact have become more of an integral part of Rugby League's active participants in 2023. Providing different playing environments within Social Rugby League for players to enjoy their form of the game, whilst retaining the competitive edge that inspired them to be involved in the sport was a key focus after the RLWC2021.



Tag Rugby League - Our partners Try Tag Rugby (TTR) development rate continues with the number of active participants reaching 10,200 players so far in 2023 with further growth expected in the second half of the year. There was huge cause for celebration as Great Britain Women's 30's won their first Gold medal at the ITF Tag World Cup in Ireland in early August. There were eight GB teams entered into the 13 potential categories, a 100% increase in teams entered into the competition. The GB medal haul of 6 out of a potential 8 medals (1 Gold, 2 Silver & 3 Bronze) a significant increase in terms of teams and medals from the previous Tag World Cup. The British & Irish Cup and TAG Nationals were streamed live on Our League in 2023 to showcase the key events in the Tag Rugby League calendar. In addition to this, Brighton has been added as the newest location for the next Tag Rugby franchise to widen the spectrum of delivery of Tag Rugby League in the U.K.



Touch Rugby League – 2023 saw the re-structure of the Foundation Touch Series, where 19 Foundations opted to deliver a range of Touch Rugby League activity: weekly evening sessions, community events and Touch leagues within their local areas. Creating alternative playing environments for participants to engage in Touch Rugby League, provided a pathway into Rugby League and an opportunity to take their experiences further. One example of this was the journey of one player within our Barrow Touch League where a participant transitioned from our Learning Disability Rugby League playing offer to Touch Rugby League and is now playing for Barrow Women's full contact rugby league team. The launch of the 2023 Premier Touch Rugby League event saw 6 foundations from Hull (Hull KR & Hull FC), Sheffield, Wakefield, Warrington & Wigan celebrate entering teams into a one-off elite touch competition supported by England Touch Association.

Community Rugby League – MORE THAN A SPORT UPDATE

Masters RL – In 2023 the main target was the retention of the 2,000 players who actively participated within Masters Rugby League in 2022. The end of 2022 saw a transitional period of change within the Masters Management Group & the positive introduction of new regional representatives. At the Masters Regional Festivals (Cumbria, South, Yorkshire, North West) we have seen numbers of teams attending decrease; this was largely due to clubs organising their own fixtures close to festival dates, which is actually a positive sign for Masters Rugby League with a sustainability assessment due at the end of the calendar year surrounding festivals and fixture arrangements. As it stands, registrations have not yet reached the anticipated level, but with the National Festival organised for September this may yet rise, with the activity providing a catalyst for new teams and new players.

X-League – The first half of 2023 has seen a 25% increase in registrations from the 120 participants registered in 2022, to 152 so far this year. The international opportunities align with the RFL's Community Lions programme, England Lionhearts hosted successful trials in the North and South of the country with record attendance in the North. With international matches expected later in the year. In addition to this, updated Match Official courses have been successfully delivered, upskilling and training new referees to take charge of X-League games throughout the country.

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 across the country.

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

Greater Manchester RL – Establishing a suitable playing offer for clubs in and around the Manchester area has proved challenging and we haven't made as much progress in 2023 as we would have expected. The Development Team along with other stakeholders are reviewing the activity and the barriers that exist with a view to reshaping the activity in 2024.

Midlands – The Player Development Festivals have proved a real success story with over 200 players playing at each. Festivals have taken place across the region from Shrewsbury to Bassetlaw. Over 600 players are registered to clubs in the league.

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 Oxford Levellers and Swindon St George have all taken part in activity.

We continue to work with existing youth and junior competitions to embed Player Development League principles within existing competition frameworks.

The City of Hull continue to lead the way in this regard. They run development days across the various age groups throughout the season.

In 2023 we have soft launched the Lions Development Programme a new player and coach development initiative which has seen a new player development offer that is non-competitive and help massively towards embedding player development principles, which in turn, go a long way towards addressing the key recommendations from the game wide review which was finalised prior to the pandemic.

The North East has unfortunately seen its number of teams and players reduce, we are working with the key stakeholders in the area for the rest of 2023 to put a plan in place to consolidate for 2024.

Increase the Number of Female Participants

The popularity of women's sport continues to rise. The Development Team has had a strategy in place since 2017 to continue to drive the accelerated growth of women's rugby league spearheaded by the Women's Super League. We are now entering Phase 3 of the strategy which will see the continued evolution of a full national pyramid, increased localised activity and specific girls' development programmes.



Girls Growth Programmes

Futures

Building on the launch of the Futures Programme last year, we expanded the programme to include 12 hubs across the country (up from 6 hubs in 2022). We also expanded all hubs to include two age groups, the age of which depended on geographical area and the demands and/or barriers for the girl's game in those areas. Southern based hubs focussed on U14s and U16s to build the next player base to support the ever-growing Women's Super League South and newly formed Women's Super League Midlands competitions. Hubs in other geographical areas focussed on U13s and U15s to ensure playing opportunities were available for the increased number of girls moving into the girls only youth age groups from the primary mixed age playing offers. Over 190 girls have taken part in the programme so far this year which ran across 8 weeks over the summer months.

RugBees

After a successful pilot programme of a girls U7s-U11s with Warrington Wolves foundation, our RugBees programme for girls was launched in March across 22 foundations. Using the learnings from the pilot, the structure of the RugBees programme would be 20 weeks delivery (no games programme) designed around core skill development, introducing the sport of rugby league and building the confidence of young girls in a welcoming environment. So far there is a mixture of girls new to the sport that are trying rugby league for the first time and girls already participating in mixed community teams that enjoy the development within an all-girl's environment the programme provides. Many of the foundations have used the programme as an opportunity to introduce more female coaches, including members of their own women's teams to run the sessions, which not only provides role models for the young girls attending but continues to develop the next generation of female coaches.

There has been a range of attendance figures and success rates across the different rugby league foundations delivering the programme with some areas struggling to obtain enough numbers to provide a meaningful programme and others thriving with growing numbers. A total of 425 girls across the 22 foundations have taken part in the programme so far this year with incentives built in to reward girls that are attending regularly and hitting key milestones.



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Building a National Pyramid

Women's Super League South

The Women's Super League South has entered its 3rd season and included the addition of a 7th team in Thurrock t-Birds, unfortunately, before the season began, Oxford Cavaliers had to withdraw from the competition, so the season got underway with 6 teams. Additional challenges of working around the Challenge Cup and the last-minute withdrawal of Oxford Cavaliers led to an unfavourable fixture calendar which meant the competition hasn't flowed as well as we would have liked this season; this along with individual team challenges has resulted in 4 of the games unfortunately not going ahead.

Cardiff Demons and London Broncos competed brilliantly in the Challenge Cup competition and after earning their place in the WSL South final 2023 they will qualify for the Women's Challenge Cup competition again in 2024.

The Women's Super League South Grand Final took place on 27th August with Cardiff Demon's seeking a third consecutive title. The hat-trick eluded the Demons with London Bronco's picking up their first ever title winning 22-10.

Both Bedford Tigers and London Broncos have grown into a position of now having a reserve side which have competed in development fixtures this season.

Women's Super League Midlands

As part of the strategy of growing the Tier 2 of the women's pyramid, WSL Midlands has been introduced in 2023 for the first time. Telford Raiders, Leamington Royals, Coventry Bears and Cheltenham Phoenix are the founding teams of the competition with new teams already expressing an interest for 2024. Initial plans were to have a home and away fixture calendar but after receiving team feedback at the start of the competition, it was decided that the most beneficial structure for player and team development was to move to a festival style format. Each of the 4 teams have hosted a festival which all teams have competed in to earn league points. Telford Raiders and Coventry Bears finished top of the table and competed in the inaugural Women's Super League Midlands final on 19th August 2023 with Telford Raiders victorious.

Women's Super League North

The final area within which we are looking to introduce competition is the North. Newcastle Thunder and Workington Town have led the way in introducing a women's team this year and have played in a series of games against one another and other development teams across the country alongside taking part in the national women's nines competition for the first time. Newcastle Thunder and Workington Town are both committed to take part in WSL North in 2024 which we hope to build into a 4-team competition similar to the Midlands.

Southern Development League

Several teams across the South are in the very early stages of developing a women's team so we introduced a women's development league across the South for those teams to arrange friendly fixtures on an ad hoc basis. Brentwood Eels, Anglian Vipers, North Herts Crusaders, Bedford Tigers development team and London Broncos development team have all taken part in at least one fixture so far this year and we are working with those teams that aspire to be part of the Women's Super League South in future seasons.

Nines

The Women's Nines competition returned in 2023 after a successful first year in 2022. 20 teams took part from across the country following the same format as last year with seeded groups competing across the Nines Festival at Victoria Park Warrington which determined the 6 teams that qualified for the final. York Valkyrie, St Helens, Leeds Rhinos and Warrington Wolves made it a second consecutive finals appearance with Cardiff Demons and Wigan Warriors competing in their first Nines finals day. Wigan Warriors knocked out last years winners York Valkyrie in the semi finals and were narrowly beaten by Leeds Rhinos in the final. The festival event again was used as an opportunity to bring all areas of women and girls rugby league together with a women and girls coaching workshop delivered on the day to a variety of current and potential coaches in the women's game.

Sustainable Community Game

Community Clubs

In addition to developing new playing offers and ensuring existing competitions are customer centric we also have a focus on delivering a more sustainable community game. As a sport we are well supported by Sport England and Government, but we need to ensure we are less reliant on public funding and generate additional funds to invest in growth. Much of our work in the area is delivered through our Social Impact work (see later) but another key component is the work we do with community clubs to put Club Development Plans and Health Checks in place. Linked to Club Development Plans are RFL Development Plans which drive many of the new programmes being rolled out.

Club Development

The current financial climate is challenging for clubs who are working hard to keep facilities open and teams on the pitch. We continue to support clubs daily with a variety of different issues and challenges. Clubs are encouraged to complete Club Health Checks on a regular basis. The Health Check is a quick and easy tool which allows the clubs and Development Team to assess and provide recommendations relating to the management of the club. Over 80 clubs have completed Health Checks. Club updates are issued regularly designed to keep all clubs updated on issues affecting the community game.

Over 40 clubs have completed Club Development Plans. Many of these plans have been required as part of facilities and other funding bids. It is important that clubs regularly review progress and set manageable objectives that are realistic and achievable. We have also been working closely with colleagues in the RFL Data Team to provide us with the necessary information to deliver a more targeted approach in supporting clubs with particular needs and can contribute to wider initiatives and focuses. This includes clubs in more deprived areas, clubs in targeted geographical growth areas, clubs with participants from more diverse backgrounds and clubs with an ambition to develop a women and girls section.

The RFL safe club and best practice guide is in place supporting clubs who can also access valuable resources available from the RFL and on the Club Matters website to assist in their continued development. This includes toolkits, templates and online learning modules supporting clubs at the appropriate time to increase standards and sustainability. We are working closely with Sport England's Club Matters and other partners providing additional support tailored to their size and needs.

The RFL Community Club Finder has been updated and can be used to locate the nearest club. [Club Finder \(rugby-league.com\)](https://www.clubfinder.rugby-league.com)

Development Plans

In terms of Area Development Plans we are currently working with 28 Foundations across the country from Barrow to Newcastle, Hull to Widnes and Coventry to Cornwall. Our partners deliver agreed targets which maximizes growth in the targeted areas. All agreed targets are regularly reviewed with ongoing conversations, meetings and one-to-ones taking place along with quarterly internal reviews, whereby delivery, support and progress are discussed.

The focus for the foundations in 2023 has been delivering social touch rugby league competitions, the RugBees programme for girls only aged 7-11 as well as supporting and delivering the Schools InspiredBy 9's festivals for both boys and girls (Y7 & Y8), community club support and the delivery of the Lions Development programme (LDP) (U12 & U13), using different formats for example 9 a side or a different size ball etc ,to meet the outcomes.

Between now and the end of the year we will be discussing priorities for the 2023 season.

Strong Governance and Administration

We continue to work hard to improve consistency of competition rules and remove barriers to participants taking part in the sport. Another key component in this area is the work we are undertaking to produce a whole game calendar. This work is ongoing and linked to the Brain Health work referenced earlier. The ultimate aim is to develop a model which protects players, supports inclusivity of all, guards against overplaying and underplaying, provides windows of opportunity to engage in different playing opportunities and limit conflict between the various offers.

Other initiatives include:

Community Board

The Community Board, who are in place to represent the Community Game and ensure the successful delivery of the strategy will be undertaking a review to refresh the board to ensure that all areas of the game are represented, and we ensure we comply with the Code of Sports Governance. Further information will be issued to the community game in due course.

Community Club Governance Guide

We have created a Governance Guide for Community Clubs which is to assist Clubs and raise awareness of legal, regulatory, tax and other statutory requirements and to improve Club sustainability by encouraging good management and governance.

Information is available on the [RFL website](#) and there is also the full guidance document that can be found [HERE](#)

Enjoy the Game Update

Reminder that 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
- Improved behaviour of touchlines in the Community Game
- Improved behaviour of coaches and players
- Improved behaviours in crowds at Professional Clubs

We are pleased to note that at mid-season point we had seen a reduction in the number of misconduct cases linked to the measures in place. We will provide a further update on this in the year-end report.

Community Game Environment

A guidance note was created and circulated on spectator safety and misconduct at grounds. This has been used as guidance for misconduct cases involving spectator behaviour.

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 and will look to do this again with the societies when the season concludes. In addition, we will seek feedback from discipline panels.

Parent Workshops

Minds Matter have 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 wished to adhere to. The feedback received has been positive.

It has been disappointing that the take up from Community Clubs has not been as good as we would have hoped with sessions delivered to only 15 clubs, which is less than we agreed when we commissioned the project. This is something we will be picking up directly with relevant Competitions as we may consider a move to mandate the training for parents.

Liverpool John Moores University Research Project – Final Report Summary

We received a final report from Liverpool John Moores who were commissioned to undertake a research project to monitor touchline environments. This saw them observe games, undertake focus groups and conduct a survey.

When we consider the findings, the key messages that are consistent throughout all the data are that the behaviour demonstrated by parents is generally positive. Parents are an important factor in positive game day experiences, as are team managers, coaches, and supporters.

Parents also reported the importance of clubs being a community, where friendship groups were formed, with 96.5% of parents enjoying the overall game day experience. Nevertheless, from all data collected, there appears to be small pockets of perceived negative touchline behaviour which impacts player experience. Now that we have baseline data, we would like to conduct another touchline behaviour survey to determine if any of the interventions have been effective, for example, has the introduction of head cams positively impacted game day behaviour. The survey will be undertaken in October.

Although outside the initial aims of this project, the coach was found to be a key catalyst in general game day behaviour. Coaches were seen to display negative behaviours such as shouting at players and using abusive language, which then was seen to have an impact on both players and parents. This behaviour was seen to be more prominent with age groups over the age of 12, which contrasts with very positive coach behaviour that was identified in younger age groups (under 7's and under 9's). This is something that we will be picking up as part of the annual Coach Right Course but will also form part of coach education going forward.

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. However, the education sector proved slower to return to normal than the rest of core community game post pandemic because of greater trepidation amongst institutions.

The more cautious return in the education setting was one of the key factors as to why there has not been a full return to pre-pandemic activity levels across the community game. Whilst we will not be in a position to report on 2022-2023 education activity until the December 2023 More Than a Sport Update, we have set out below a summary of the activity that has taken place this year.

inspiresport™

Tours to Inspire the Next Generation

Schools

In the latter part of the 22-23 academic season, our Regional and National Champion Schools reached their conclusions. The Yorkshire finals were once again hosted at Featherstone Rovers RLFC, and the North West finals were played at Thatto Heath Crusaders for the first time. Finals in Cumbria took place at St Benedict's High School, in the North East Kingston Park were the hosts and in London and South East finals took place at Brunel University. Participation numbers increased from 21-22 as expected, as we continue to strive for pre-covid participation levels across all areas.

Our national Champion Schools finals had a new sponsor this year in 'inspiresport' who are a school sports tour company providing domestic and international travel options. They have been excellent in terms of enthusiastically supporting our finals events with staff presence and also assisting travel and accommodation requirements at the finals for our schools, staff and match officials. A welcome addition of a standalone showcase final for the Y10 Girls competition was added to the roster which took place at St James Park as the opening game on the Saturday of Magic Weekend, with both schools thrilled to provide such an opportunity for their female players and their families. The Y11 finals were played in April at Featherstone Rovers RLFC alongside the college girls and boys Cup finals, and the main finals day returned to Kingston Park in early July – culminating in a thrilling Y10 boys finals won in the last minute with the final play of the game. A return to Wembley for the Steven Mullaney Memorial Year 7 boys final was also welcomed, with Bedford High School (Leigh) taking on Archbishop Sentamu Academy (Hull) in a replication of the men's Betfred Challenge Cup final! Archbishop Sentamu lifted the trophy in the Royal Box following their 18-6 victory, but it was their actions at full time which will live longer in the memory of all in attendance; after briefly celebrating the result at the final whistle, the victorious players from the Hull-based school quickly made their way to their devastated opponents, many of whom were in tears and on their knees on the turf, to console them and lift them back to their feet before warmly applauding them up to collect their medals.

The School Games 'Inspired By' 9s competition continued with the support of club Foundations and strategic partners in the summer term. The competition was devised to provide playing opportunities for emerging schools and players. Invited schools participated in local festival across the north and south of the country and were then nominated by each organising body to attend one of our finals events in June to represent their club and area. We added a Southern finals event this year to give more schools the opportunity to participate in a finals event, and remove some of the financial barriers created by hosting just in the North of the country. Over 5000 participants took part in a 9s event in their local area, with over 50 teams progressing and experiencing an RFL finals event.

College and University

The college competitions ended with the return of the Premier Play-Off game between Castleford Tigers Development Academy and Warrington Wolves Development Academy at The Jungle, Wheldon Road. A closely fought game was eventually won by the Castleford side, overcoming a significant half-time deficit to claim the trophy on home soil. The Cup final was contested between Carmel College (St Helens) and Newman College (Brighton) as part of the finals event at Featherstone Rovers RLFC in April. Carmel ran out comfortable victors, but it saw the first Southern based team qualify for a final in the college game, demonstrating the growth of the game outside of the heartlands.

This year also saw the addition of the first ever girls final for College sides, with Cronton College facing Calderdale College/Halifax Panthers Development Academy after qualifying through from our regional and central festival events and a knock-out semi-final tie. Cronton College became the first name on the trophy, claiming the victory on the day.

In the South, we introduced a new 'County College 9s' event to increase playing offers for the establishments outside of our core playing areas. A successful inaugural event took place, and we will look to grow this next year, adding more teams and events to the schedule.

Off field, Maz Veater has continued to work with key stakeholders in the area to improve the status of Rugby League within universities and stabilise the sport within BUCS competition framework. A new competition structure has been accepted for the 23-24 season to add to the sustainability and integrity of the competition. Rugby League 9s also returned to the calendar for the first time since 2019; a successful Trophy and Championship event took place at Nottingham Trent University attended by 12 teams. Feedback from those attending requested a separate event in 2023/24 so the Championship event will become a season-opening event, whilst the Trophy teams will play at the end of the season to bring the curtain down on their season next Easter.

The Introduction to Teaching Rugby League course continued throughout 2023, with new establishments added to the delivery rota. The course is delivered to ITE students completing postgraduate teaching qualifications, and therefore the next generation of the PE workforce in schools. In total for the 22-23 academic year, 276 students in 12 cohorts received training at 9 institutions.

The University development day sessions continued with further sessions at York St John University which were led by Wales RL Women's head coach Tom Brindle and England Captain Jodie Cunningham and ahead of the mid-season international fixtures V France in Warrington, led by Warrington RL Womens & Girls Manager Ryan Cartledge. Participants at that event received a ticket to watch the matches which followed at the Halliwell Jones Stadium. Across the academic year 104 participants attended the Development Days, with 50 of those in the 2023 events.

Conversations have continued with targeted Universities about the formation of an RFL administered Women's University competition for Winter 23-24, with the intention to prove to BUCS Sport Review panel that a sound 'Proof of Concept' exists for the commencement of a BUCS Women's RL competition from September 2024.

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 for the Social Impact section of the Community Rugby League More than a Sport Strategy & Vision 2022-2030. In line with the Strategy aims and the new Social Impact Reporting Framework, that will be used during the annual end of year reporting, this update is split into three strands:

- 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. 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 AIM – Tackle Inequalities

Supporting our people and communities through tackling the inequalities and barriers that exist within society is key for increasing personal development and social mobility. This strand links closely with the game wide objectives of Developing our People and Supporting our Communities.

Theme 1 Updates – Education & Employability

- **Community Employability & Skills Programme** - Since January 2023 we have been working on a bespoke programme 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. The programme will be delivered in collaboration with a Strategic Funding Partner and the Foundation landscape as an optional collaboration. The partner has been identified along with 11 Foundations who want to be a part of the programme. Partner contracts and a full media launch are due to be completed before December 2023. The programme will launch in 2024.
- **Youth Endowment Fund (YEF)** – 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](#). The project aimed to improve children's wellbeing, resilience, social relationships and confidence while building their awareness of risky behaviours. In the long term, the programme hopes this leads to a reduction in offending and substance use and an increase in engagement in education. 7 Rugby League Foundations delivered the Educate Mentoring programme, a 12-week programme targeted at 11-14-year-olds. Sessions, delivered by Rugby League Foundation coaches, are typically provided in school, last two hours, and comprise of a mentoring conversation followed by physical activity. Topics covered included self-control, drug and alcohol awareness, healthy lifestyles, self-esteem, and goal setting for the future. Participants also complete an accredited SLQ Young Leaders award as part of the intervention. 'At risk' young people are selected for Educate Mentoring by schools, which target children with poor behaviour and attendance and an interest in sport. The report found 218 people took part in the programme. We are continuing the conversation with YEF for what is next now the pilot is complete.

Theme 2 Updates – Health & Wellbeing

- **Community Wellbeing Hubs (CWHs)** – Following a successful pilot of the project in 2022 with 5 CWHs established 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 are now working through the Invitation, Induction and Development phases with the next batch of CWHs. In the Invitation Phase (June) 33 Community Clubs registered their interest in the project. We are currently working with 11 of these clubs in the Induction Phase (August – October) of the programme and will continue to support in the Development Phase (November – December) for the clubs to become fully established CWHs. This will make a potential total of 16 CWHs by December 2023, which is 6 over our initial 2023 aim of having 10 CWHs established. In 2023 we have also set up an Our Learning Zone resource, Community Wellbeing Hub Network for shared learnings and had a media launch. We are also in conversation with a commercial partner for the project that we hope will be confirmed by September 2023.
- **Lead the Game (Veterans Foundation Charity)** – We are working with 3 Foundations and a project lead from the Match Officials Department for the delivery of this project. The project suffered some disruption due to launching in 2021 when some Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were still in place. However, in 2023 this has started to build momentum again with Foundation engagement. Warrington Wolves hosted a successful Armed Forces Weekend event and gained interest from their community for engaging in this project. Each Foundation will need to support 30 veterans onto a Match Official course by November 2023, but also support the participants mental wellbeing and offer mentoring opportunities for personal development. To support this, we are developing a promotional video with Jack Smith (Match Official and Ex-Armed Forces) signposting people to the Foundations sign up links. We will continue to monitor this project over the next few months.

STRAND 2 AIM – 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 the field and promoting the benefits in engaging. This strand links closely with the game wide objectives of Growing our Game.

Theme 1 Updates – 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 51% growth across all 3 variants to date, when compared with the mid-point 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** - The Learning Disability Rugby League (LDL) offer has again developed with, to date, a 20% increase in participation/registrations, against the mid of 2022 registration figures totalling in at just under 400 participants. This growth is further reflected in participating foundations with 17 now engaging in the Community Integrated Care Learning Disability Super League. The LDL has been adapted to make the festivals more accessible and in the main become regionalised. With 2 national events where all participants and foundations are invited to play in and celebrate the variant 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, reflecting the Men's, Women's, and Wheelchair Super League finals in host city. All other activity is foundation led and geographically considered meaning travel costs are reduced for all. In addition to these developments, the Inclusive Volunteering Programme, led by Community Integrated Care, has seen an increase in opportunity to be part of the sport, through diverse volunteering opportunities within the game. Notably these opportunities extended to multiple participants across the Magic Weekend in Newcastle.



- **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, via the impact of the World Cup and multiple factors, a 61% increase in participation to date when compared with the mid-point of 2022's registrations. As such the season has become more robust with 9 festivals, and 9 participating teams, 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 across the magic weekend with a return to an on-field exhibition game at St James' Park between Wigan and Salford's PDRL teams. Additionally, to the regular domestic offer, the domestic representative programme has seen developments to expand and grow. The domestic rep programme has changed to be more inclusive and open to all participants who have been through the classification process. These took form in the shape of Community Lions Development days where all classified individuals were invited to attend. It is now an opportunity to develop appropriately impaired participants, give confidence to participants of relevant impairments and give a much more equitable playing offer through classification. This year there will also be two tests against Wales and England one hosted by each of the nations mentioned.

- **Wheelchair Rugby League** - Notably, to date, participation has increased by 81% when compared with the mid-point of 2022 registration figures. The domestic season has seen changes across all the levels with more teams participating 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 in the middle. The regional divisions, with a focus on development through playing and completing fixtures, were split across the southeast, west, and north with divisions ranging from 3 to 5 teams. These divisions allow for less travel and subsequent cost and give games of appropriate ability levels to teams ensuring participants can enjoy participating. The championship division has seen an upturn in competitiveness and is a home for several teams previously in the Super League showing the strength and depth of players across the game. Whilst the Super League has seen more competition for places, increased levels of exposure and interest and unprecedented growth for the teams within. 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, to this the Challenge Trophy and Cup competitions have this year seen an increased level of participation with 14 teams engaging across both, with a final’s day at Sheffield EIS for both games. The Trophy to be streamed on OurLeague and Cup on BBC, again bringing greater visibility to the game with the Grand Final already being confirmed to be broadcast by Sky. Through the Created By fund, with match funding from applications, just short of £500,000 has been invested into kit and equipment for Wheelchair RL teams equating to hundreds of new sports chairs and necessary equipment to participate.

Theme 2 Updates – 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. This will be a baseline measure and the information needed to support those least representative with targeted and bespoke projects encouraging clubs to become more representative of their community.
- Tackle It – Throughout 2023 the RFL’s Inclusion Lead has been updating the Tackle It Action Plan which will include new targets and measures designed to support participants.

STRAND 3 AIM – Be Sustainable

We will maximise Rugby League’s proven ability to deliver positive social impact through ‘Our League 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 Updates – Community Game Sustainability

- **Our League Life Foundation** – In 2023 significant progress has been made on the concept of a central charitable entity set up by the RFL. 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.
- **Foundation Sustainability Network (FSN)** – In November 2022 the FSN was created as a collaborative forum involving RFL development colleagues and nominated Foundation (CCOs) leaders focused on supporting the long-term growth and sustainability of CCOs. The FSN focuses on three core aims Foundation Health, Governance and Showcasing. In 2023, quarterly meetings have taken place for shared learnings and feedback directly from our Foundations that have shaped project planning and delivery.

- **Foundation Development Plans** - This year has seen the first implementation of disability development plans, via application, for successful foundations. These development plans, whilst consistent in priority areas from the RFL, are bespoke to and created by the individual foundations offering significant proposed growth across all disability variants as a prerequisite to accessing the funding. Delivery of disability development plans is driven by creation of a delivery role within Foundations bespoke to disability variants which requires a commitment of part funding and investment in this area by Foundations.
- **Foundation Support (Annual Survey, Mentor Scheme, Upshot, Forums, Impact Reports)** - 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 have also launched a Foundation Mentor Scheme in 2023, as an informal, optional network where Foundations who are looking for support in a specific area are paired with a successful Foundation in that area. This allows sharing of successes, challenges and any top tips that can be shared across the network.

We have also launched the use of Upshot for all Foundations receiving Development Plan funding for 2023. This will allow full monitoring and evaluation of the Development Plan projects, but also a tool for the Foundations to use for their own project reporting. This will allow us to gain further insight into the Foundation Landscape, for learnings and to shape future support.

All Foundations are required to attend 4 forums across the year to receive RFL updates, but also to network between 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.

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 the 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, and a 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 (TF, TIF, RLSF, Selco Builders Warehouse, Created By) – We will continue to monitor the national funding landscape for appropriate funds; however, the above support contributes to the encouragement of the community game to become sustainable away from emergency grant funding.

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. The fund has supported 208 awards across the community game to support lower-socioeconomic groups, Learning Disability RL, Physical Disability RL, Masters RL, Women & Girls RL, targeted W&G's support in the Midlands, Southern regions and Cumbria and the Referee Societies. 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 although this fund has now closed the monitoring and evaluation process is close to completion with the last 2% (5 community clubs) of Sport England's target to complete their cost reconciliation form and evidence. So far 145 out of 191 have completed the monitoring and evaluation process.

A new fund Growing Grassroots sport with Selco Builders Warehouse has recently launched. This is an opportunity for community clubs to be able to access £2,000 worth of building materials and 20 tickets to one of England's Autumn International fixtures as part of a prize draw.

- **Environmental Sustainability** – As part of our drive to build stronger communities we are encouraging clubs and foundations to become more environmentally sustainable and ensure environmental sustainability forms a key part of our decision making within the RFL. Environmentally sustainability forms a key part of the wider RFL Strategy 2022-2030. The aims are to:
 - Lead the sport in driving a more environmentally sustainable future.
 - Develop a sport-wide sustainability action plan; and
 - Work with clubs and other stakeholders to deliver its action plan.

As a National Governing Body, we recognise the opportunity to set new environment standards for the game as a whole and ensure environmental sustainability will be at the heart of our decision making. With the support of Sport England we have been working in partnership with British Association for Professional Sport (BASIS) who have carried out a consultation with clubs which included:

- An environmental sustainability audit of the RFL, the professional clubs and a selection of asset-owning amateur and/or community clubs to understand the current level of activity and engagement;
- An action plan for professional clubs, plus a more generic action plan for community clubs; and
- Guidance on education and training or a tool kit that would support in achieving the actions and providing support for all clubs to manage environmental sustainability issues.

The outcomes will also support clubs' financial sustainability for the future. Awareness of environmental sustainability is at its early stages in Rugby League, but there is a clear and significant opportunity to act for the benefit of all.

Theme 2 Updates – Volunteers

- **The Volunteer Strategy** – The Community Rugby League More than a Sport Strategy & Vision 2022-2030 included a commitment to produce a volunteer strategy which has recently been finalised. 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.

The new Volunteer Strategy can be accessed [here](#)

- **Volunteer Portal & Central Volunteer Workforce (TryForce)** – In 2023 so far, over 25 RFL community game and Development Team events have been 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. Workforce development sessions are also taking place with Sport England, Club Matters, Sport Structures, Substance, and Continuum Sport and Leisure. This aims to build on any potential gaps in volunteers' access to support and education resources covering areas they are eager to develop.
- **RLWC2021 Community Volunteering Project** - The community volunteering recruitment project has quickly gained momentum after a slower start and has now engaged 15 Foundations to recruit and develop Inclusion RL volunteers and 14 Foundations for RugBees. Overall, 19 Foundations are participating with 68 new volunteers recruited or identified to be recruited. The closing date for this project has been extended until October 30th which will allow time for more foundations to get involved. £23,420 of the total £35,429 budget has been spent with £12,009 yet to be allocated. 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 late October.
- **Total Volunteer Numbers** – For the 2023 season 5,711 volunteers have registered on GameDay. Of these volunteers, 54% are male and 46% are female. 317, or 6% of these volunteers have a disability. 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 force are from the top 30% most deprived communities by IMD, 14% were from the lowest 20% of deprived communities.

- **Match Officials** - Up to the end of August 2023 9 in person match official courses have taken place with a further 8 planned for the end of 2023. We have had 208 newly qualified officials with 65 refereeing 3 games or more following the completion of the course. Our retention rate has risen from 26.78% last year to 33.76% so far in 2023 and work is ongoing to improve this further. All professional academies have also been invited to hold a match officials' course, with Hull KR running the first. This qualified 65 academy and scholarship players, who are now able to referee in the community game.
- Using existing and new links with community clubs we have 8 courses planned from October through to January, in Huddersfield, St Helens, Nottingham, Wigan, Exeter, Sheffield, Lancaster and Reading. The latter 3 of these courses being supported by BUCS, who have booked facilities and used connections to promote these courses.
- In June 2023 we appointed the first full team of female Match Officials to the Year 10 Girls Champion Schools Final at Magic Weekend. Megan Mills (Hull, Referee), Rhiannon Horsmann (Leeds, Touch Judge), Esmail Wright (Warrington, Touch Judge), Niamh Bragg (Wigan, In-Goal Judge), Liv Leech (Wigan, In-Goal Judge), Rebecca Floyd (St Helens, Reserve Official) were the appointed officials and took part in team building exercises the evening before. All 6 girls and the 2 coaches (Rebecca Whiteley and Beth Neilson) have come from the newly launched Women and Girls Match Officials Programme.

Theme 3 Updates – Facilities

The hugely successful CreatedBy Grants Programme linked to the RLWC2021 has now closed for new applications with the final awards being made in August 2023. The programme generated nearly £26m of investment into the community game. Further details of the success of the programme can be found [here](#)

The CreatedBy funding has been a key driver in the growth in participation we have seen particularly amongst our women and girls and athletes with a disability. Not to have access to any funding streams to underpin new activity would be very detrimental to the sport.

We are fortunate therefore to have the support of Sport England and The Football Foundation as we work to ensure community rugby league clubs can access facilities funding.

Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund Launch

In April we officially launched the Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund to community clubs and foundations. This is a £5m pot of funding going directly into grassroots Rugby League to improve the experience of people involved in the sport.

Two streams of funding exist, one is a 6-year tapered revenue fund towards enhanced grounds maintenance, the other is a 75% contribution up to 25k for capital investment into machinery and other necessary equipment.

We have worked symbiotically with the GMA and Football Foundation to get this to launch and continue to be enthused by the engagement and support received for it amongst the community game.

Playzone Funding Opportunity and Contribution to Consultation

Still at its consultation phase in many areas, the Playzone programme intends to deliver over 300 purpose built multi use games areas by 2025 that sustainably tackle inequalities faced by underrepresented groups.

As a governing body, we are frequently engaged in conversations around design and activation for these sites, particularly in areas where Rugby League currently exists or there is high demand for it to do so. We are encouraged by this opportunity and eagerly await to see the opportunities that arise at these sites.

Multi-sport facility investment increasing opportunity for rugby league to be played nationwide

Through the continued investment into Multi-sport via the Football Foundation and Sport England we are able to carefully identify and curate facilities that meet the needs of the local communities.

We are involved from an ideas stage to the Programme of Use and this allows Rugby League's requirements to be considered throughout the process. Access to 3G and Ancillary Facilities is crucial to supporting the continued growth of the sport.



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Contribution to Playing Pitch Strategies and Local Football Facility Plans incorporating Rugby League at a planning policy stage

Through our strong relationships with key stakeholders, we are frequently inputting into important planning documents to document the provision and ambition for Rugby League in local areas. Inputting at this strategic level helps to inform future investment decisions and fundamentally tackle challenges faced by community rugby league clubs. 100% of Rugby League Community Foundations and 80% of Community Clubs have contributed to this in-depth data collection piece making the initial data sets one of the most robust and detailed across all NGB's.

Capital investment into pitch improvement works at Rugby League specific sites enabling clubs to increase their reach and ability to tackle inequalities

We are continuing to roll out a programme of £1m investment specifically into Rugby League clubs that have an ambition to grow their capacity to tackle inequalities. These works centre mainly around pitch improvements, allowing them to play more Rugby and engage new members into their club. The first investment from this programme was at Ashton Bears ARLFC who have expanded their capacity to grow their Women & Girls membership and run more community events.

Over the next 18 months we will see another 8 sites benefitting from this investment to improve playing experiences for Women & Girls in priority areas.

Consultation with community clubs and foundations as we work towards a Facilities Strategy to 2030

The first period of 2023 consisted of a consultation period with all of Community Clubs and Foundations to understand the current facility landscape. We had excellent engagement with the Survey with Consultants KKP making specific note to the strength of data this has provided in the early stage of the process.

This data will now be used to form the basis of a Facilities Strategy to 2030, identifying priorities, how these align with the RFL Community Strategy and Uniting the Movement and how future investment into the game should be directed. Key themes to be explored within this are capacity for Women & Girls Rugby League, Sustainability of Facilities, Capacity of Clubs and Areas for Growth.

Working with stakeholders to trial new surfaces in the sport and understanding the viability of these long term

We continue to work closely with a number of stakeholders into the use of hybrid pitches at a community game level. There are challenges associated with this, but the willingness and open mindedness of the clubs to trial this must be commended. We are currently exploring sustainable solutions to the maintenance programmes which will hopefully keep the running costs down allowing the clubs to benefit from the increased usage capability of these surfaces.

Collaborative, multi-agency working groups in Local Authority areas putting Rugby League in a strong position

We are proud to have developed working groups with Local Authority Planning, Parks and Green Spaces, Leisure, the GMA, RFL and Community Clubs in some key priority areas to help collectively tackle challenges faced by all. This has resulted in open streams of communication and a platform where clubs feel as though they are heard, and Local Authorities are able to explain their processes and manage expectations. A special mention to all those involved for being a part of this process.

Continued buy in to focussed CPD and Webinars regards funding opportunities and the launch of PitchPower

We continue to see great buy in to webinars being held by RFL and GMA around funding opportunities and 'How-To' webinars related to PitchPower. This remains to be a useful platform for communicating information and circulating afterwards having recorded the webinar. We will continue to develop sessions like this for our community as and when the opportunity arises.

160 community clubs registered for our most recent webinars about PitchPower and how to benefit from the new Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund into Rugby League.

900% increase on grounds volunteers taking up formal GMA Level 1 Qualifications

We are encouraged to see a vast increase in the number of learners completing the GMA Level 1 Course for Grounds Management in Rugby League. Up from 3 learners last year this shows that our messaging around grounds care, pitch improvement and maintenance is starting to gather momentum. As part of the terms for the Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund, clubs must commit to enrolling 2 volunteers on the GMA Level 1 course, so we are hopeful the number of appropriately trained grounds volunteers in the community game will grow quickly before the end of 2023.

Community of Practice events (Professional Grounds teams, community clubs, GMA)

There have been 2 Community of Practice events held for community grounds volunteers to visit a professional Rugby League club. Hosted at Salford Red Devils and Wigan Warriors, volunteers have had the opportunity to observe the grounds team's matchday preparation and understand why and how they do things. These have been invaluable learning opportunities for our Community of Practice and are events we intend to keep holding as the season continues.

These are small, carefully designed learning opportunities for community grounds volunteers to get a genuine idea of the inner workings of professional grounds teams and apply this valuable information to their daily practices.

PitchPower- Number of Pitches and Quality of them

General condition of pitch (PQS)		
Initial Visits - Including PP		
	Pitches	% of pitches
Unclassified	11	8%
Basic	50	34%
Good	70	48%
Advanced	13	9%
No data	2	1%
Total initials	146	100%

Strategic Investment into Grounds Care in Community Clubs

Via the RLWC Small Grants programme we have invested in 11 clubs to purchase their own Grounds Maintenance equipment that will kickstart their Pitch Care journey. In a number of cases these are multi sports clubs who look after several pitches and will find investing in machinery a more cost-effective, long-term solution than outsourcing routine maintenance responsibilities to contractors.

Improving Club's preparedness for investment into Facilities

The RFL, GMA and Football Foundation have implemented a robust set of criteria and approval process for grant funding into the community game which supports and encourages clubs to be better and more responsibly governed.

A minimum expectation as part of any funding application is that the club has an up-to-date Development Plan and Health Check in place and commits to investing in the long-term development of their volunteers through paid and free of charge courses.

Supporting Clubs to become Multi Sport

We have been preparing to access the Multi-Sport Investment into grass roots sport by working with community rugby league clubs to become multi-sport. For some this means developing a women & girls section, for others this means joining forces with community football clubs, but all is geared towards increasing the reach of the club and improving the experience of members within that community sports club.

Insight Led Intervention into Community Clubs

By having a larger, more resourced Facilities Team we are able to capture need, challenges and conversations more accurately which in turn informs action and investment opportunities. Overlaid with strategic input, detailed data & insight this has led to some impactful projects being delivered via investment from RLWC2021 Small Grants, Football Foundation capital investment and localised partnership funding.

Social Impact 2030 Targets Summary:

1. **Develop 10 partnerships across a diverse range of sectors, including health and well-being.**
 - 4 in 2023 (Community Integrated Care, Access Sport, Veterans Foundation, Grass Maintenance Association).
 - 2 additional partnerships are in development and planned for signed agreements by December 2023.
2. **Establish a network of 30 Our League Life Community Hubs, delivering positive social impact into the heart of our communities.**
 - 5 established.
 - 11 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.**
 - 1046 in 2023.
4. **Meet all the targets and measures within the tackle it action plan relating to players and volunteers.**
 - The Tackle It action plan has been updated by the Inclusion lead that we will now work closely with.
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 used 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.**
 - £175,429 in 2023 (£291,928 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.**
 - £249,979 GMPF and Capital Pitch Investment Fund committed to date. This will increase considerably over the next month as capital works projects are approved.
8. **Introduce 1000 volunteers supporting individual development and improving physical and mental health.**
 - A baseline is now in place to monitor the growth across the 2022-2030 period and the Social Impact Reporting Framework is now established to monitor health and wellbeing outcomes.

