

# Community Rugby League MORE THAN A SPORT REVIEW END OF YEAR 2024



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## Executive Summary

The Rugby Football League's (RFL) 2024 "More Than a Sport" report highlights a productive year for Community Rugby League, emphasizing a commitment to inclusion, sustainability, and player-centred opportunities while making progress toward its 2022–2030 Community Strategy goals.

### Key Progress:

- **Participant Growth:** Positive trends in both Youth and Junior. However, male open-age participation continues to decline, prompting targeted interventions.
- **Inclusive Playing Opportunities:** Wheelchair Rugby League participation continues to grow at an impressive rate. As anticipated, changes in Physical Disability Rugby League (PDRL) and Learning Disability Rugby League (LDRL) focusing on more specialised appropriate disabled participants affected the overall numbers of participants. New pathways for women and youth were introduced.
- **Expansion of Social Rugby League:** Formats like Touch, Tag, and Masters Rugby saw growth, with a record 103 teams at the London Tag Fest and new franchises in York and Newcastle.
- **Facilities and Sustainability:** Over £1.7 million was invested in pitch maintenance and improvements. Clubs adapted to economic challenges through innovative partnerships, enhancing financial sustainability.
- **Governance and Volunteer Development:** Volunteer engagement rose by 4.3%, supported by initiatives such as the National Volunteer Awards. Governance enhancements included regional forum updates and competition management improvements.
- **Social Impact:** The "OurLeague Life" initiative established eight Community Wellbeing Hubs and launched programs to combat youth crime and support employability.
- **Education and Talent Development:** School and university programs expanded, with improvements in league structures and the introduction of the Pathway to Performance (P2P) program for U15 and U16 female players.
- **England Community Lions Success:** The Lions achieved major victories, including the U19 European Championship and a historic tour to Perth, with robust player welfare support.

### Challenges and Opportunities:

- Declining open-age male participation and regional disparities require targeted interventions to sustain engagement.
- Economic pressures and facility accessibility remain challenges, necessitating continued investment and innovation.
- Enhancing competition structures and governance will be crucial in maintaining long-term growth and inclusivity.

### Vision for 2025 and Beyond:

The RFL aims to build on 2024's progress by:

- Reviewing and adapting competition structure and playing calendar to maximise growth.
- Expanding inclusive playing opportunities across all demographics.
- Strengthening governance through enhanced club support and volunteer development.
- Increasing community impact through initiatives that tackle inequalities and promote sustainability.

Through strategic initiatives and stakeholder collaboration, the RFL is committed to ensuring Rugby League remains a sport for all, fostering both participation and long-term growth

## Introduction

Welcome to the End of Year 2024 Community Rugby League More Than a Sport Update. This update summarises the activity undertaken by the RFL's Development Team in the second half of 2024 and serves as an end of year report.

The work of the Development Team contributes to The Community Strategy & Vision 2022-2030 which 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
- Growing our education offers
- Having a positive social impact

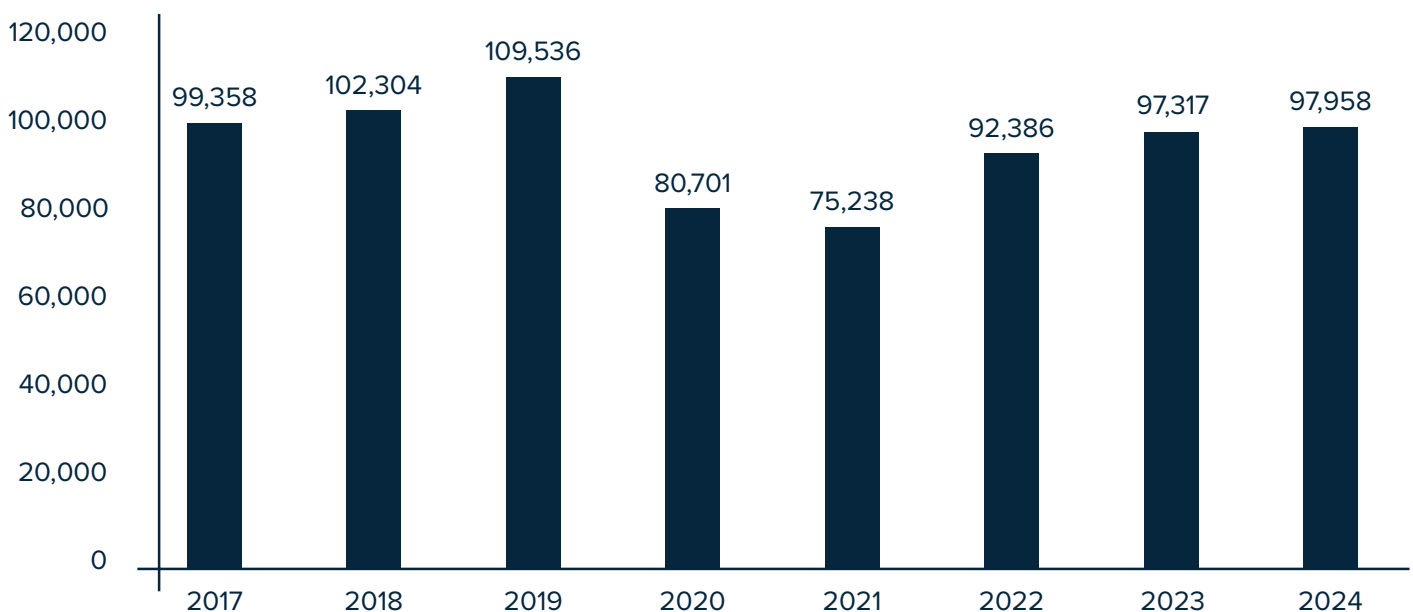
## Active Participant Updates

As is usual, we report to Sport England twice a year on the number of active participants. This reporting occurs at the end of August (mid-year) and in December (end of year). The mid-year report typically focuses on the number of participants involved in core community club settings, while the more comprehensive year-end report includes data on social and educational activities as well.

Activities in educational settings, such as schools, colleges, and universities, occur within academic years. The number of active participants reported at the end of 2024 will reflect the activities that took place from the beginning of the autumn term in 2023 through to the end of the summer term in 2024.

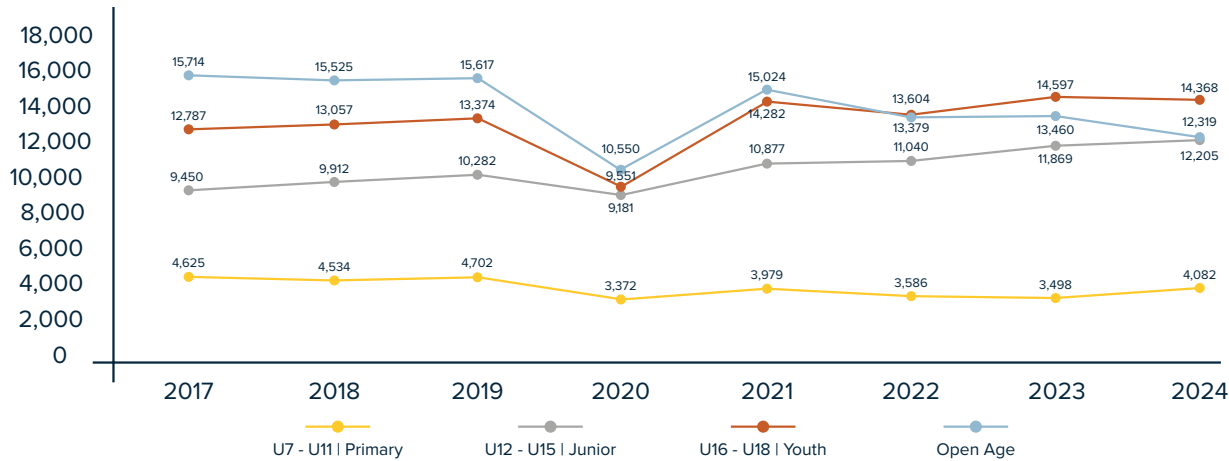
Following the RLWC2021, which drove growth in participation, and accelerated growth in the number of participants in women and girls and disability taking up the sports, a key focus for 2024 was consolidation. This includes bedding in new formats and structures and particularly in the case of our disability offers a greater focus on more specialised appropriate participation. The small increase in the number of participants in 2024 reflects this approach.

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



- Baseline at the start of 2017 was 95,000
- Total Participants is up +1% vs 2023

### Total community club-based players by age group



The graph above illustrates the trends in active participant groups by age since 2017. While COVID-19 impacted participation, the Primary, Junior, and Youth age groups show a consistent and mainly positive trend. However, the Open Age category stands out as an outlier, experiencing a decline from 2022 to 2024. This trend is concerning; although there was some growth between 2018 and 2019, the long-term outlook indicates a decrease in numbers.

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

Core Community - Age / Gender				
Core Indicators	Baseline 2017	2023 End of Year	2024 End of Year	% Diff 23-24
<b>U7 to U11 (Primary)</b>	<b>12,000</b>	<b>14,597</b>	<b>14,368</b>	<b>-2%</b>
Boys		12,426	12,233	-2%
Girls		2,172	2,135	-2%
<b>U12 to U15 (Junior)</b>	<b>9,400</b>	<b>11,839</b>	<b>12,319</b>	<b>4%</b>
Boys		9,419	9,717	3%
Girls		2,474	2,602	6%
<b>U16 to U18 (Youth)</b>	<b>4,800</b>	<b>3,498</b>	<b>4,082</b>	<b>17%</b>
Boys		3,159	3,445	9%
Girls		339	637	88%
<b>Open Age</b>	<b>18,099</b>	<b>13,460</b>	<b>12,205</b>	<b>-9%</b>
Men		11,286	10,387	-8%
Women		2,171	1,818	-16%
<b>Totals Male</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>36,286</b>	<b>35,782</b>	<b>-1%</b>
<b>Total Female</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7,138</b>	<b>7,192</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>43,424</b>	<b>42,974</b>	<b>-1%</b>

Overall, the number of players based in community clubs decreased by 1%. The movement of Women's Super League players from registering in community settings is a contributing factor in the decrease. Without this switch, the numbers would be broadly the same in 2024 as in 2023.

In the realm of junior sports, we have observed a commendable growth of 3.8% compared to the previous year, with overall participation rising from 11,869 in 2023 to 12,319 in 2024. This growth is evident across both genders:

- Boys have seen a pleasing increase of 3.2%, climbing from 9,412 participants in 2023 to 9,717 in 2024.
- Girls have experienced an impressive rise of 5.9%, moving from 2,457 participants last year to 2,602 this year, indicating a positive trend in female engagement in junior sports.

Turning to the youth category, the figures reflect a strong performance, with a notable increase of 16.7% compared to 2023. Participation has jumped from 3,498 in the previous year to 4,082 in 2024.

- Among boys, there has been a healthy increase of 9.1%, from 3,159 participants in 2023 to 3,445 in 2024. The move in age at which a player can take part in open age rugby from 16 to 17 has also had an impact.
- The rise in participation for girls has been particularly striking, with a strong growth of 87.9%, rising from just 339 participants last year to 637 this year. This positive increase underlines the growing interest and support for young female athletes driven by a new U18's offer.

#### Slight Decline in Open Age Participation, Especially Among Men

- In contrast to the encouraging trends in junior and youth categories, there has been a slight decline in participation among open age players, with an overall decrease of 9.3% compared to the prior year. The total number of open age participants has dropped from 13,460 in 2023 to 12,205 in 2024.
- Men's participation has decreased by 8%, from 11,289 participants in 2023 to 10,387 in 2024. This indicates a notable shift in this demographic. The rationale behind some of these changes can be found in the customer-centric competitions section.
- Women's participation has decreased due to Women's Super League's transition to professional status, as participant figures for this league are no longer included in the community game statistics.

#### The number of female participants

Age Group	2017	2024
Primary (U7 to U11)		2,135
Youth (U12 to U15)	918	2,602
Junior (U16 to U18)		637
Open Age	776	1,818
Total	1,694	7,192

### Inclusive Playing Offers

The overall inclusion rate has seen a decline of 4.29% compared to the previous year, 2023. However, there has been positive growth in the Wheelchair category, which has experienced a robust increase of 7.29% since last year. On the other hand, there has been a decrease in participation among players in both the PDRL (Physical Disability Rugby League) and LDRL (Learning Disability Rugby League) categories. This was anticipated as outlined in the inclusive player offers section below

Core Indicators	2022 End of Year	2023 End of Year	2024 End of Year	% Diff 23 - 24
Physical Disability RL	155	263	223	-15%
Learning Disability RL	318	388	343	-12%
Wheelchair	269	467	504	8%
Totals	742	1,118	1,070	-4%

### Education and Social Offers

The second largest population of players comes from the education setting. Education has experienced an increase of 1.35% compared to 2023. This increase continues the positive trend in this area.

Core Indicators	2023 End of Year	2024 End of Year
Schools	34,620	35,155
Colleges	700	763
Universities	1,255	1,150
Totals	36,575	37,068

The social category has experienced an increase of 4.47% compared to the previous year, 2023.

- Touch has shown pleasing growth, increasing by 13%, indicating a growing engagement with this segment.
- Try Tag has also performed well, achieving a growth rate of 3.85%, suggesting positive reception and participation.
- Masters has seen a solid increase of 4.58%, reflecting a steady upward trend in this area.
- Overall, these figures highlight progress and potential opportunities across various segments within the social category.

Core Indicators	2023 End of Year	2024 End of Year
Touch	1,090	1,232
TTR	10,596	11,004
Masters	2,008	2,100
X-League	181	137
Walking	107	134
Totals	13,982	14,607

# Brain Health

As we conclude the year, there have been significant steps forward in player welfare and game development, guided by the recommendations of the Brain Health Committee. Here are the key updates:

## Key Areas of Focus

- **Protecting Players**
  - Upholding a duty of care to all participants.
  - Policies informed by the best available, evolving medical evidence.
- **Protecting the Sport**
  - Mitigating increasing insurance costs.
  - Proactively adapting to new knowledge and research.
  - Reducing the risk of future legal claims.

## Strategic Objectives:

- Reduce concussion rates by 30% over the next five years where measurable.
- Address modifiable concussion risks in areas where rates cannot yet be measured.
- Reduce sub-concussive exposure by 30% over the next five years.

## Actions for 2024

- To achieve these objectives, 44 policy changes will be implemented, including:
- Tackle height modifications to address concussion risks tied to head impacts.
- Increased sanctioning to discourage unwanted behaviours.
- Coaching interventions to reduce head-on-head collisions by 50%.
- Expanded education initiatives for players, coaches, and officials.

The mandated non-contact off-season came into force for the first time in November with little effect on the majority of clubs and teams. We will continue to monitor compliance throughout 2025 and beyond.

The introduction of Touch or Tag for Under-6 and Under-7 has been implemented and will be progressively rolled out.

Work continues with Leagues to refresh and optimise the playing calendar, ensuring a balanced mix of competitive games, varied playing opportunities, and a strong focus on player development while aligning with favourable weather conditions.



The 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

We remain committed to our goal of ensuring we are player-centred driving growth and retention of players. This includes a commitment to ensuring we are providing appropriate playing offers and aspirational playing opportunities which include representative rugby league and showcase events and finals.

This year, we successfully delivered over 200 events, including 30+ showcase finals. These showcase finals were meticulously resourced with professional staffing, media coverage, venue dressing, and medals, creating memorable experiences for participants and fans alike. These enhanced events inspire players and foster long-term engagement with the game.

Our Delivery Team has been at the forefront of ensuring competitions are player-centred and customer-centric, catering to the diverse needs of participants across all levels. Their work has not only provided opportunities for current players but has also played a key role in attracting new participants, broadening the sport's reach, and solidifying Rugby League as a sport for everyone.

As we reflect on 2024, it's clear that the sport does not operate in isolation from wider societal changes and trends in a post-COVID world and the need to ensure players are protected as much as possible in terms of brain health. However, even where there is a risk to our sport, there is a potential for positive outcomes if we are focused on the opportunities to review and challenge the way the game is delivered, including our competition structure, playing opportunities and calendar.



## 2024 Men's Open-Age Competitions Overview

As highlighted in the mid-season update, a notable concern has emerged regarding the decline in the number of men's open-age players. While the overall number of clubs and teams participating has remained steady compared to 2023, the drop in registered players indicates a worrying trend that could affect competition viability in the long term. Whilst this drop is a trend we need to address, it is worth noting that teams are operating with fewer players. When combined, the National Conference League (NCL), Yorkshire Men's League (YML), and North West Men's League (NWML) only operated with one less team in 2024 compared to 2023, but across the three competitions, the number of registered players fell by an average of 6%. Recognising the importance of addressing this issue proactively, preparations for the 2025 season are well underway. A thorough and collaborative review of the current competition structures, formats, and rules will be conducted, involving key stakeholders such as management groups, clubs, and players. This review aims to uncover the underlying factors contributing to the decline and develop targeted strategies to encourage greater participation. These strategies may include initiatives to enhance the player experience and adjustments to competition formats to better meet player needs. Our goal is to halt and reverse the declining participation trend, ensuring the long-term sustainability and growth of competitions for years to come.

In 2024 the RFL Board approved a consultation process aimed at exploring the principle of a national men's pyramid, as well as identifying the most effective mechanisms for achieving this transition. This approval provides an opportunity to address structural opportunities and challenges within the sport, including the potential for a broader overhaul of the current competition framework. Central to this review is the recognition that societal changes in recent years, particularly the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, have significantly affected participation in team sports. A comprehensive review will allow us to evaluate and adapt our structures to better align with the needs and expectations of today's players. By doing so, we aim not only to improve player retention but also to make the game more attractive to prospective participants.

While the overall number of registered players has declined, there have been encouraging developments across several competitions that demonstrate the sport's resilience and potential for growth. The Yorkshire Men's League reported a 10% rise in fixture completion compared to last season. This is particularly noteworthy as it reflects an increasing commitment from teams to maintain competitive fixtures. Additionally, three new clubs joined the league for the first time, several teams stepped up to compete well in a structured division after participating in the Merit Division the season before, and several clubs ran a Merit Division side for the first time. Many of these clubs are expected to make the step up to a structured division in 2025. The North West Men's League similarly experienced an increase in fixture completion, with both leagues benefiting from a significant reduction in the number of teams that withdrew during the season. Across the Southern Regional Leagues, the number of cancelled games fell by around 18% when combined. The Midlands Men's League continued to grow, welcoming two new clubs and reporting a 15% increase in active players and a 14% increase in the number of games played when compared to last season.

However, there were some regional challenges. The West of England did not run a playing offer in 2024 due to a lack of interest, and the South West's playing offer was significantly reduced due to the withdrawal of several teams. Similarly, the North East region ran a limited playing offer in 2024, highlighting the need to address regional imbalances and encourage more widespread participation.

One of the most frequent pieces of feedback we received from clubs across all competitions is the importance of having consistent fixtures and a high fixture completion rate. This is something we aim to improve on each season by introducing entry criteria that consider a team's fixture completion from the previous season. The availability and standard of match officials is another common complaint, and we will continue to support our Match Officials Department in delivering their strategy and supporting initiatives to improve match day environments.

The lessons of 2024 have reinforced our commitment to proactive planning, collaborative problem-solving, and player-centred approaches. By addressing challenges head-on and building on this year's successes, we are confident in our ability to sustain and grow men's open-age competitions for years to come.

# Growth Through Retention

We continue our efforts to embed the ethos and principles of Player Development Leagues into the Community Game. The focus on player development rather than an overly competitive competition structure, which drives the “win at all costs” mentality, is crucial for fostering long-term growth and improving retention.

## 1) Embed the Ethos and Principles of Player Development Leagues (PDL) through Adapting Competition Frameworks and Focusing on Player Development

- The efforts of Foundations and Clubs in expanding their Lions Development Programme (LDP) offerings have been encouraging, with increasing numbers of players gaining access to a variety of playing opportunities.
- As the LDP expands and more Foundations and Clubs run the programme, it is essential to implement stronger regulations and address poor practices to ensure programmes are run consistently and do not negatively impact the sport. The next LDP Conference on 7th January 2025 will reiterate key messages, and we are developing a ‘handbook’ that outlines these regulations in more detail.

## 2) A refresh of The Game-Wide Review (originally published in 2019) has been conducted over the last six months.

This project focuses on improvements across six key areas, as identified in the original review and supported by recent research. In Autumn, six steering groups were formed, each producing action lists to address challenges in the sport, including tackling player dropouts. The actions arising from this review are outlined below.

### Competition:

- National Competition Calendar: A coordinated calendar will be developed, setting out various formats for competitions throughout the year.
- Review Playing Offers and Formats: We will assess the playing offers and formats across all age groups: Primary, Youth & Junior, and Open Age.
- Cup Competitions Review: A review will take place to examine the role of National, Regional, and District Cup Competitions and their relevance within the broader competition structure.
- Consistent Playing Laws: Standardising playing laws across the country to ensure uniformity in competition and improve fairness (linked with governance).
- Player Pathway/Development: Strengthening the links between the Lions Development Programme (LDP) and professional clubs to support player development from grassroots to elite levels.
- National Men’s Pyramid Exploration: A review will explore the potential for establishing a National Men’s Pyramid, aligning competition structures to better facilitate progression.
- Youth Age Group Challenges: Special attention will be given to the challenges faced by the Youth age groups, and we will develop targeted recommendations for improvement.
- Player Surveys Insight: Incorporating insights from recent player surveys to guide all changes to competition structures and player pathways.

### Governance:

- Standardisation of Playing Laws: Ensuring consistency in playing laws across all levels and regions.
- Review Competition Rules: A comprehensive review of competition rules to establish uniformity across the board.
- Club Accreditation and Leadership CPD: Implementing club accreditation that includes leadership CPD for chairs and executive committees, focusing on setting standards, ethos, and best practices. The accreditation should also link to development plans and health checks.
- Behaviour Improvement Programme: Prioritising the touchline group in addressing behaviour at all levels, ensuring appropriate conduct and improving the matchday environment.

### Match Officials:

- Full Year Calendar: Developing a year-round calendar that includes training nights, centres of excellence, courses, and major events. This will be coordinated to minimise clashes.
- Funding for Match Officials Development: Increasing access to funding to support the development of match officials at all levels.
- Recruitment Campaigns: Targeted recruitment campaigns aimed at current players and new participants, with a particular focus on recruiting more match officials.
- Head Cam Support: Expanding the use of Head Cams for match officials, increasing the numbers and providing maintenance support to ensure reliability.

### Coaching:

- Mandatory CPD: Making CPD (Continuing Professional Development) face-to-face sessions mandatory for coaches across all levels.
- Launch CPD Programmes: Launching a series of core, female, and talent-focused CPD programmes to support coaching at various levels.
- Reintroduction of Coaches Pathway: A revitalisation of the Coaches Pathway, providing clearer development pathways for coaches.
- Level 1 & 2 Course Revamp: Revamping the content of the current Level 1 & 2 courses, ensuring they reflect contemporary coaching needs.
- Introduction to Rugby League Course: Scoping out a new 'Introduction to Rugby League' course for beginner coaches.
- Tutor Diversity: Encouraging expressions of interest for new tutors, with a focus on diversity in the tutor pool.
- Events for Tutors: Providing more events to keep tutors upskilled, supporting their ongoing development and effectiveness.
- Rebrand to England Rugby League: A broader rebranding strategy to align coaching initiatives with England Rugby League.

### Adults (Volunteers and Parents) :

- Parental Education Project: Collaborating with Working with Parents in Sport to design a project aimed at educating and supporting parents in the Rugby League community.
- Parent Resources on Website: Developing a section on the RFL website with resources for parents, including webinars, handbooks, posters, guides, and quizzes.
- Game-Wide Codes of Conduct: Introducing standardised codes of conduct for parents to sign, promoting positive engagement with the sport.
- Supporting Clubs/Coaches with Parents: Creating resources to help clubs and coaches better engage with parents, ensuring a supportive environment for players.
- 'Parents Workshop' Presentation: Developing a workshop presentation that clubs can use to guide parents in how to support their child's Rugby League journey.
- RFL Volunteer Strategy: Further promoting the RFL Volunteer Strategy (Grow, Support, Value, Diversify), implementing findings from the 2024 Volunteer Survey.



#### Touchlines :

- Respect Campaign Reinforcement: Revitalising the Respect Campaign to enhance the matchday atmosphere and improve touchline behaviour.
- Game Day Manager Courses: Creating Game Day Manager courses tailored to different levels (primary, youth & junior, and open age). These courses will be delivered through various methods, including online, virtual, and club-based formats.
- Discipline Record Management: Reviewing how we collect and manage discipline records, aiming for a more holistic view of a club's discipline status (rather than competition or team-specific).
- Code of Conduct Enforcement: Introducing mandatory codes of conduct, potentially based on the ones used for Respect, for players, coaches, parents, and volunteers.
- Technical Areas and Hi-Viz Compliance: Strengthening compliance with technical areas, such as the use of appropriate Hi-Viz vests, with monitoring through secret shoppers.
- Club Responsibility for Touchlines: Reinforcing that clubs should take more responsibility for maintaining appropriate behaviour on touchlines, including volunteers, spectators, and players.

#### Next Steps

The actions outlined in the Game Wide Review will be implemented over the next 12 months, with specific steering groups tasked with monitoring progress. The findings from player surveys, consultation with clubs, and feedback from coaches and officials will be used to refine and adapt these initiatives, ensuring they align with the needs of the Rugby League community.

#### Playing Opportunities

##### 1) Increase Player Development through Differentiated, Aspirational, and Customer-Centric Playing Offers

- The Game-Wide Review refresh will examine this topic in more detail, with a steering group set to delve into this further in 2025.
- We are supporting the development of player development staff through the Foundations. These staff members are brought together twice a year for LDP conferences to encourage collaboration and share resources.

##### 2) Ensure We Are Player-Centred through Improved Communication and Digital Platforms

- This area of the work plan requires additional support and focus to ensure effective communication and engagement with players across all levels.

##### 3) Targeted Initiatives to Increase Retention of Players and Improve Transitions, Particularly Between Youth and Open Age Settings





RUGBY  
RHS



LIONS

DYN  
Plumbing

## England Community Lions

The Community Lions Programme continues to offer aspirational playing opportunities for young players, helping bridge the transition between youth and open-age competitions.

In 2024, the England Community Lions had a remarkable year, with notable successes and significant milestones across multiple age groups and competitions. Highlights include:

- U19 European Championship: The England U19s successfully defended their title, retaining the European Championship.
- U17 Series in France: The U17s played two competitive games in France, though they were narrowly defeated in both.
- Historic Men's Tour to Perth: The Men's team completed a historic tour to Perth, Australia, winning both 'test' matches in a two-nil series victory. Additionally, they participated in the Harmony 9's, advancing to the quarter-final stage and showcasing the cultural diversity of Perth in a weekend full of rugby league action.
- England Universities Men's Team: The Universities team retained the Men's Presidents Cup and played Wales in a two-game series.
- U16 Four Nations: The U16 team finished as runners-up in the Four Nations, defeating Ireland and Scotland before a narrow loss to Wales in their final game.
- U16 Regional Team: The U16 Regional team hosted Sud Provence U17s in a two-game series.
- PDRL Fixtures: The PDRL team played a two-game series against Wales, continuing to promote participation in the physical disability rugby league.

## Programme Structure and Participation

In 2024, the Lions programme ran 25 trials to select final squads and hosted 36 training sessions. Over 1,200 players were nominated by their community clubs, with 500+ attending trials and 146 players given the opportunity to represent their country at community level.

## Welfare and Well-being Support

All programmes were supported by RL Cares, providing essential well-being support throughout the year. This included the use of Self Care guides, brain health workshops, nutrition seminars, and regular sleep sessions. The RL Cares Director of Welfare/Well-being was also present in France and Perth, offering round-the-clock support to players and staff, especially during the three-week tour in Perth.

## Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Several challenges were identified in 2024, including the high costs of the programme for participants, especially those on lower incomes, who struggled with travel expenses for trials and training sessions. The lack of a central training base or National Stadium for rugby league poses logistical difficulties, as community clubs often host their own fixtures on weekends. Additionally, to address the loss of the London Broncos Academy programme, trials were held in London to give players an opportunity to join the Lions programme, ensuring no talent is missed.

## Community Support and Legacy

The programme continues to be well-supported by families, friends, and teammates at every game. Community clubs that host training sessions are rewarded by having the opportunity to host matches, generating essential income through entrance fees and bar/tuck shop sales. Players and staff provide positive feedback, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to represent their country and highlighting the potential for further opportunities in higher age groups within the programme.

The Lion's programme has also served as a stepping stone for many players aspiring to reach higher levels, with numerous participants securing academy contracts, semi-professional contracts, and full-time professional contracts. In addition to player development, the programme supports the growth of volunteers, particularly coaches, by offering hands-on experience and regular CPD opportunities.

### Plans for 2025

In 2025, the programme will reselect players for the U16, U17, U18, Women's, PDRL, and University teams. The focus will be on enhancing the welfare and well-being support available, ensuring that players have access to round-the-clock care. We will also be recruiting additional volunteers to work on the programme, offering opportunities for development coaches, medical staff, and team managers to enhance their skills and contribute to the programme's continued success.

### Produce a Whole-Game Calendar

- A draft calendar for 2025 has been created, incorporating recommendations regarding concussion protocols.
- Further work will be conducted through the Game-Wide Review refresh to refine and finalise the calendar.

## Participation Growth Initiatives

Reinvigorate and rebuild traditional Rugby League areas where participation has stagnated and there is a capacity for growth.

- A process has been developed to identify areas that require focus for growth.
- We are currently running a programme in the North East, which has faced challenges and difficulties in the past year. Despite the absence of an adult competition, participation has still increased in the region.
- We are conducting a review of all activity undertaken in Cumbria.

Continued expansion in developing and new areas where Rugby League can have a positive impact on communities and under-represented groups.

- The same identification process used for stagnating areas will also be applied to target growth areas.
- In 2024, two pilot projects were launched: one in Lancashire with Wigan Warriors and another in North Yorkshire with York City Knights.
- The Wigan project into Lancashire has seen an increase of almost 300 players registered in community clubs in that area.
- The York project is more challenging as they are setting up new clubs in Selby and Harrogate however, they have had some success and have learnt lessons ahead of 2025.

Support foundations in delivering RFL Growth Plans and supporting growth initiatives.

- Currently, 26 Foundations are working as delivery partners.
- These Foundations are spread across the North East, North West, Cumbria, Yorkshire, Midlands, London, and the South.
- Key 2024 projects include Rugbees, Social Touch, the Lions Development Programme, and Inspired By 9's.



## Social Rugby League

In 2024, the social variants of Rugby League, including non-contact and limited-contact forms, have maintained significant traction among active participants many of whom do not want to play the full contact version of the sport. These diverse playing environments have enabled players to remain within a team environment improving core skills etc.



### Tag Rugby League Update

The development of Tag Rugby League, led by key partners Try Tag Rugby (TTR), continues to progress. The number of active participants reached 11,004 players in 2024, with further growth anticipated. The London flagship event achieved record participation with 103 teams, and the first-ever Junior Tag League was successfully trialled in Brighton. Two new franchises have opened in York and Newcastle.

TTR has experienced a notable increase in participation, particularly within English cities, where the primary demographic comprises of young working professionals.



### **Touch Rugby Foundation Touch Series**

The 2024 Foundation Touch Series saw 19 Foundations, continuing the delivery of various Touch Rugby League activities. The conclusion of 2024 activity saw 1,020 players participate in the Foundation's Touch Series, with an increase in community club touch activity to 212. Raising the overall participation within Touch Rugby League to 1,232 players.

One challenge that is beginning to emerge is facilities related. Whilst new sports facilities are always welcomed, the development of such sports facilities are invariably accompanied by increased costs. Given that Rugby League operates predominantly in areas with high indices of multiple deprivation (IMD), this has created an immediate barrier to participation and potential further growth in certain areas.

### **Premier Touch Rugby League**

The 2024 Premier Touch Rugby League expanded to include events in Hull and Wigan, with seven teams participating. This expansion facilitated the transition of 70-80 players from regional sessions and leagues to the Rugby Football League's elite touch competition, across 2 events.

Travel and associated costs pose a significant barrier to community players especially in the non or limited contact formats of the game. While there was some demand for additional events from some players, the consensus indicated that most players/staff preferred the current format, this will continue in 2025. This format includes a round-robin event followed by a split event, where the top four teams compete against each other and the bottom four teams do the same.

### Masters RL

Masters Rugby League participation remained consistent, surpassing 2,000 participants in 2024. While male participation increased slightly to 1,937, the women's section grew significantly from 88 players in 2023 to 163 players in 2024. Increased club attendance at regional festivals required a cap on the number of clubs to ensure safety and adequate playing time. A record attendance for clubs at the National Festival with 36 Men's teams and 6 Women's teams rounded off a successful year with 2,100 participants taking part.

The England Men's Masters Lionhearts programme was reintroduced, with a tour to Belfast in November. Twenty players represented their country playing international games against Ireland & Wales.

The ITV Calendar programme took a particular interest in a 70+-year-old player making his international debut for England Masters Lionhearts reaching viewing figures of 174,000 viewers on regional free-to-air television.

2024 was a breakthrough year for women's participation in Masters Rugby League, with record numbers of players and three stand-alone events dedicated to Women's Masters. Six clubs will attend the Masters National Festival in September. Additional teams are set to be introduced with a streamlined calendar with more festivals in 2025.

Both gender-specific formats have an aligned central calendar for festivals which is a first for Masters, focussed on achieving good practices and encouraging further participation.



### X-League Grand Prix/Walking Rugby League

As with Touch RL, travel for games remains a barrier, as does the lack of regular playing opportunities. The number of Grand Prix events will be reduced in 2025 to increase the number of clubs at each event. Several new members have joined the Management Group which will help progression next year.

A number of Foundations still continue to deliver Walking Rugby League. We will continue to monitor and support this formation of the sport given the wider mental health and weight management benefits via social sessions.

## Female Participation



## Girls Growth Programmes

### Futures

In 2024, the Futures Programme focused on three key areas: U12 activities in Hull, U14 and U16 teams with playing opportunities in London and the South, and U12 development in targeted clubs across the North West and Yorkshire. The programme achieved notable success nationwide by helping several community clubs offer girls' activities for the first time, thereby increasing access to the sport for girls in previously underserved areas.

However, the programme did encounter some challenges, which are common when launching new initiatives. The geographical distribution of the clubs and the difficulty in providing match officials for festivals were significant hurdles that impacted the overall playing experience, especially in the Southern and Midlands regions, where clubs are fewer and more isolated. These factors will be considered when planning the calendar for the 2025 activities, with a goal to increase participation among U13 and U15 age groups and to create sustainable pathways for young female Rugby League players in the Southern regions.

The project in Hull was particularly successful, with several clubs adding teams and taking part in friendlies, festivals, and summer tournaments. We have received applications from three additional clubs in the area to join the official league structure in 2025. Similarly, the targeted funding in the North West and Yorkshire has led to the establishment of five new teams in that age group.

### RugBees

The Rugbees program was implemented across the Foundations as part of their Development Plans for 2024. Engagement levels and attendance were high, with a total of 3,651 instances of participation from 409 unique participants over the past 12 months. This not only highlights the program's extensive reach to new participants but also showcases strong return engagement, as participants attended an average of nine sessions each. Many of these girls have progressed to join community clubs. The program has proven to be highly valuable in providing young girls with their first experience of structured Rugby League sessions. Graduates of Rugbees have reported benefits from participating in the sessions before joining community clubs.

A greater level of inter-foundation collaboration has begun to develop in the Rugbees space, with each area openly sharing their successes and learnings to enhance opportunities for girls across the country. Warrington Wolves shared their model at our latest Foundation Forum, highlighting the success they have achieved as our largest provider. We will continue to support and grow the program with new initiatives in 2025, including staff and volunteer development opportunities as well as collaborations between Rugbees groups. This will enable the girls to meet and engage with others from different areas, fostering a greater sense of belonging and connection to something larger.

## Women's Rugby League

In 2024, a restructuring of the leagues and competitions under the Women's Super League was implemented to enhance the Women's National Pyramid.

The structure comprises the Northern Championship with 9 teams, League 1 with 8 teams, and League 2 with 6 teams. Additionally, development teams across the regions participated in friendly matches throughout the season. The fixture completion rate across the league improved in 2024 due to increased fines for late postponements, which had a positive effect. In the Championship, only 2 games were forfeited during the 18-week season. League 1 also saw an improvement with only 3 cancelled games, compared to 9 in 2023, while League 2 had 9 cancellations, down from 14 in the previous year.

For 2025, the Women's League structure will feature 11 teams in the National Championship, including the London Broncos and Cardiff Demons, alongside 8 teams each in Northern League 1 and Northern League 2. To date, we have welcomed entries from 7 new development teams. Notably, 4 teams that participated in development activity in 2024 advanced into League 2, demonstrating their commitment to the league.

In 2024, there was an increase in the number of women's teams in the Midlands and South. The Midlands Championship and South-East regions successfully took part in centralised venue events, while clubs in the South-West participated in festivals. By the end of the season, 20 women's teams were active across the two regions. We have begun accepting applications for 2025, which will finalize the structures in the new year.

## Girls Rugby League

The Girls League continues to grow, with registered players increasing by 17% from 2023, rising from 2,866 to 3,371. There are now 3,233 active players compared to 2,590 last year. The number of games played has also risen from 968 in 2023 to 1,116 in 2024. In 2024, we welcomed 13 new clubs, resulting in the formation of 16 new teams. For the first time, we introduced an Under 18s league, ensuring that there are playing opportunities for every age group from Under 11 to Under 18.

As the league continues to experience rapid growth, we face ongoing challenges that we will address in partnership with clubs and the Management Group. These challenges include improving the cup competition format to maximize playing opportunities and reducing last-minute fixture postponements. Now that the league is established rather than developing, we will focus on enhancing the off-field standards of teams to align with this growth.

Applications for the 2025 season have now closed for structured leagues. We have received entries from over 180 teams representing existing clubs and applications from 13 new clubs. We will again be offering leagues from U11 to U18, with 10 teams currently registered for the Under 18 category.

## Player Development Programs

**Player Pathways:** The Pathway to Performance (P2P) talent development program is now in progress across the eight teams that participated in the Women's Super League (WSL) in 2024. This program offers an additional training opportunity each week for up to 12 U15 and 12 U16 players with each WSL club, running in three blocks of eight weeks throughout the year. Players will maintain their primary registration with their community clubs and continue to play for those clubs during their P2P journey. Additionally, the first U19 Academy squads are now fully assembled and in training for the new season. For the first time, a complete schedule of fixtures will take place, and players will hold primary registrations with the WSL teams. They will have the opportunity to represent their respective first teams up to four times before transitioning full-time into the women's squad.

The dedicated social media channels for Women's Rugby League have steadily grown in followers since their launch earlier this year. Player takeovers and club contributions to the content have proven popular, alongside the sharing of women's and girls' specific information and news. Please refer to @womensrugbyleague on Instagram and Tik Tok.



WOMEN'S NINEE CHAMPIONS  
27th July 2024

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NINEE

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SMALLEY  
OPERATORS  
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42

Academics

## Sustainable Community Game

Community clubs play a vital role in the growth of Rugby League, and ensuring their sustainability is a key priority. Various initiatives, partnerships, and targeted support are being implemented to aid these clubs. We continue to work collaboratively with Sport England, Buddle, and Substance, focusing on development insights and data volunteer support.

Ongoing club health checks and development plans are essential for clubs seeking funding, improving facilities, or increasing community involvement. These plans are regularly updated with the assistance of club volunteers.

Community clubs continue to demonstrate resilience and innovation to maximize their resources, ensuring they remain sustainable and effective within their communities.

Whilst inevitably we spend a lot of time supporting clubs with a whole range of issues which require immediate attention such as loss of facilities, disputes amongst volunteers, amongst other things, we are continuing to offer support for all clubs with more targeted support for others. Professional Club Foundations have also been proactive in using local development plans and their networks to engage and support ongoing work, creating tailored opportunities for their communities.

There are some clubs that are growing significantly. These are primarily those that have Women and Girls sections. This has also resulted in more extra-large clubs with over 15 teams playing, resulting in shifts among the top 50 clubs based on player registrations. However, this growth comes with challenges, as some clubs are facing issues related to facilities, finances, management, governance, administration, and volunteer recruitment.

We have established positive partnerships with the British Asian Rugby Association (BARA) and other organisations to encourage clubs to become more welcoming and representative of their communities as a whole.

We have engaged with several external partners to create new opportunities for generating finance or investment for clubs. For instance, we are collaborating with In-Post to generate annual income through drop-off and pick-up storage units based at clubhouse premises. We are also investigating new commercial opportunities to involve existing sponsors at a grassroots level. Additionally, we are diversifying the use of clubhouses for business and independent bookings, making the space available for events and community occasions.

### Our League Active

Our League Active (OLA) membership remains a vital source of funding, enabling us to sustain and develop the community game. Regular updates have been shared with the Community Board, and we continue to keep the wider rugby league community informed through the More than a Sport reports.

In 2024, the cost of servicing the community game exceeded £816,000, reflecting ongoing investment in governance, safeguarding, administration, and match officials. To ensure OLA continues to contribute fairly towards these costs, the Community Board has approved small fee adjustments for 2025, ensuring continued support for clubs, players, and officials. This aligns with our commitment to strengthening grassroots rugby and fostering sustainable growth.

To enhance engagement with OLA members, we have introduced improved benefits, including enhanced insurance coverage and the expansion of the Rewards4 scheme. Through the Our League app, players can earn and redeem points by making appearances, predicting scores, and participating in interactive features. This initiative has been widely promoted at club meetings and across social media, encouraging more members to take advantage of its benefits. Looking ahead to 2025, we will launch monthly prize draws for clubs and individuals, offering exclusive rewards such as coaching clinics, VIP matchday experiences, and special competitions.

The OLA Membership, alongside continued support from Sport England, will help secure the long-term sustainability and growth of the community game. Additionally, we remain dedicated to driving social impact, tackling inequalities, improving facilities, and ensuring Rugby League is accessible to all.



## Sport Governance and Administration

### Community Board

The Community Board, a sub-committee of the RFL Board, oversees the management and development of the community game. As the Community Game evolves, the Board plays a pivotal role in ensuring all aspects of the game are effectively managed and developed in alignment with the broader Community Strategy.

To better represent the diverse facets of the game, a comprehensive and transparent recruitment process was recently completed to bring in new members. This initiative aimed to align the Board's composition with the evolving needs and goals of the Community Strategy.

The newly formed Community Board now includes individuals with a broad range of skills, knowledge, and experience. This diversity equips the Board to address the varied aspects of the community game effectively. Members bring expertise in areas such as:

- Running community clubs, managing competitions, playing, officiating, coaching, and volunteering in disability sports and other settings within the Community Game and higher and further education sectors.

For more information about the Community Board members, please visit the RFL website [HERE](#)

### Southern Regional Development Forum

Following a comprehensive review of the Regional Development Forums (RDFs), a series of recommendations has been confirmed for implementation starting in 2025. The RDFs, established in 2022, aimed to support the Rugby Football League (RFL) in growing and developing Rugby League in the South. Their objectives included:

- Providing insights and feedback to the RFL.
- Maintaining open communication among stakeholders across the four regions (West of England, South West, London & South East, and Midlands).
- Supporting the delivery of the Southern Regions Strategic Framework.

### Key Successes of the RDFs to date

- **Volunteer Development:** The Southern Volunteer Action Plan, aligned with the RFL's National Volunteer Strategy, has shown tangible progress. A notable achievement is improving accessibility to Coach Education resources.
- **Lifting the Profile of Rugby League in the South:** Focused efforts on enhancing the sport's visibility resulted in initiatives spanning social media campaigns, competition standards, player pathways, and raising the profile of competitions.
- **Cross-Regional Collaboration:** Collaborative groups have supported the development of new programmes and projects across the South, fostering unity and shared purpose.

### Southern Competition Management Group

- The establishment of the Southern Competition Management Group has been pivotal. This group:
- Oversees the OA Men's competition and aligns regional structures.
- Builds on initiatives like the reintroduction of the Harry Jepson Trophy and the Southern OA Men's Representative Programme.
- Supports competition rule reviews and league management.

### Challenges and the Need for Change

The current RDF structure comprising six groups meeting up to four times annually has proven unsustainable, placing undue pressure on volunteers and RFL staff. This necessitated a streamlined, more efficient approach while preserving the benefits RDFs bring to the sport's growth. As a consequence, several recommendations will be implemented in 2025 to enhance sustainability and effectiveness.



## Community Game Environments

The “Enjoy the Game” initiative successfully transitioned into the RESPECT campaign, marking a significant shift in Rugby League’s approach to fostering positive sporting environments and addressing anti-social behaviour. Having successfully implemented the campaign’s goals; Rugby League is committed to reinforcing the principles of RESPECT once again in 2025 to ensure continued progress and alignment with the sport’s values.

### Key Achievements and 2025 Reinforcement

Through the RESPECT campaign, Rugby League has successfully addressed critical areas of concern, including:

- 1) Abuse of Match Officials
  - Decreasing incidents of abuse directed at referees and officials.
- 2) Touchline Misbehaviour
  - Reducing aggressive or inappropriate behaviour by spectators at community games.
- 3) Coach Misbehaviour
  - Encouraging coaches to model respect and positive conduct.
- 4) Player Misbehaviour
  - Promoting fair play and respect on the field.
- 5) Crowd Misbehaviour
  - Cultivating a family-friendly and respectful atmosphere at professional games.

As we move into 2025, the RESPECT campaign will once again be a central focus for Rugby League. This renewed emphasis will ensure that the sport continues to uphold its values and provides a positive environment for all participants. With new strategies and a continued commitment, Rugby League aims to further embed the principles of RESPECT into every level of the game.

As outlined in the Game Wide Review section, several key initiatives will be implemented to support adults (volunteers and parents) and enhance touchline behaviour, all linked to the RESPECT campaign.



## Education

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

### Schools

The review of the Champion Schools format was completed in the summer of 2024 as part of a broader education strategy refresh. With brain health remaining a priority, alongside the financial pressures many schools face and the rising costs of cover and transport, we have streamlined the national rounds of the competition for boys in years 7 to 10. This overhaul has resulted in amendments to the seeded places available to different regions. These changes are designed to reduce the number of games for players who are expected to have a higher player load due to their involvement in community Rugby League, with higher-seeded teams receiving a bye for Round 1 of the competition. We have also eliminated pre-determined fixtures (e.g., Wales 1 vs. London 2) to increase the likelihood of different schools facing each other. This should help distribute travel more evenly and spread costs across more schools.

The local rounds of regional qualifying activities resumed with the support of Foundations and volunteer teacher coordinators at the beginning of the new academic term in September. Participants enjoyed a longer off-season, with the Year 7 Wembley final planned for June 2024 and the remaining finals scheduled for early July.

Funding has been confirmed for 2025 for our Inspired By 9s competition, which is managed by our Foundation partners. We will continue to deliver the North and South finals in this format, which is our preferred School Games offer. With rule modifications and community player caps, this initiative aims to attract new players from schools that may not already engage in our traditional offerings, with the intention of transitioning them into club Rugby League and expanding the player population in junior age groups for both boys and girls.

### College and University

For the 2024-2025 season, we adopted a different approach to the College league by removing the grading phase and instead accepting applications for each tier of the competition. This strategy has proven successful so far, resulting in a high percentage of game completions. The cup competition is also underway, and following consultations with colleges, the Cup final will be moved earlier in the calendar in 2025 to avoid clashes with exam periods and to prevent breaks between the end of the regular playing season and the final.

Girls' college games and festivals are back on the calendar as well. The competition format for 2024-2025 has been amended, introducing a playoff series that will begin in January 2025. The qualification method will be determined based on feedback from participating teams.

In British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS), we commenced the season with a 9s event at Leamington Spa Rugby Club, where Northumbria 1s claimed the title after facing tough competition, including a defeat in one of the group games. Immediately afterward, the new national men's league began, comprising six teams from across the country. The first audits for participating teams have been completed, and games continue to be competitive, with standards rising on and off the field. The Tier 1 and Tier 2 leagues have become more balanced due to the movement of some stronger teams into more suitable leagues, making the competition more open for all involved.

The Women's Winter University League is now in its second season, once again featuring six teams but with some different institutions participating this year, including Northumbria University, which is fielding two teams. The season commenced for women with a 9s competition featuring seven participating teams, with the goal of having ten teams involved by the end of the season to demonstrate to BUCS the true demand for Women's Rugby League in the university setting. Development initiatives are already underway at additional institutions, supported by Maz Veater at BUCS and the Development team at the RFL. We will continue our efforts while focusing on increasing female representation in their chosen university activity.

We are also committed to educating the future teaching workforce through our "Introduction to Teaching Rugby League" course, which is delivered to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students completing their postgraduate teaching qualifications. We have re-engaged with all the institutions from last year, including Edge Hill University after a three-year gap.

## Social Impact

Supporting our people and communities is a fundamental part of who we are, contributing 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. 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. Supporting and growing our volunteer workforce and enhancing club facilities are both vital in creating a more sustainable environment.

Much of our work in this area is driven through Our League Life, the RFL's social impact brand. A key part of our plans to expand our impact in this area is the launch of a new RFL charity, The RFL Community Trust planned for January 2025.

We are also 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.

To achieve the above aims, our Social Impact team divides its work into three main areas, tackling inequalities, inclusive playing offers and sustainable growth.

### Tackling Inequalities

Our goal remains to increase physical activity through Rugby League while addressing social inequalities and barriers in our communities. In 2024, we strengthened our Social Impact work with eight partners across various sectors, including The Youth Endowment Fund and Tempo Time Credits. Our efforts have generated £650,000 of additional income for the sport (£946,929 since 2022). We have also established eight Our League Life Community Wellbeing Hubs.

### Project Updates

Health and wellbeing remain a key focus, with initiatives aimed at tackling inequalities through targeted programmes. The Community Wellbeing Hubs continue to support local clubs in delivering social impact, with eight hubs established so far. New partnerships and sponsorships, such as AXA XL, have provided crucial support for accreditation and training.

Lead the Game has engaged veterans in match officiating courses, offering pathways into Rugby League careers. Despite some recruitment challenges in 2024, the programme remains committed to supporting veterans through education, employment, and community engagement.

We're on the Same Team was relaunched in 2024 in partnership with Community Integrated Care, focusing on tackling prejudice and fostering inclusivity in schools and community clubs. With 36 sites engaged and player ambassadors involved, the programme continues to shape positive attitudes and behaviours among young people.

### Social Mobility

Beyond increasing participation, we strive to enhance social mobility by creating opportunities regardless of background. Inspiring Futures, funded by The Youth Endowment Fund, provides mentoring for at-risk youths through professional Rugby League foundations, with an extensive evaluation process underway to measure impact.

Tackle Our Life aims to improve employability skills among 16-18-year-olds through Rugby League-inspired programmes. Although a 2024 pilot was delayed due to funding restrictions, we plan to launch a test phase in 2025, engaging additional foundations to scale the initiative.

## Overall Impact

We have launched the OurLeague Life social impact brand and website, investing in media campaigns to showcase Rugby League's influence. Our first dedicated Week of Social Impact successfully highlighted these initiatives, reinforcing the sport's role in fostering community engagement, personal development, and long-term sustainability.

During Social Impact Week, The RFL leveraged multiple social media platforms to engage its audience, generating a total of 144,688 impressions and reaching 86,266 users across Instagram, Facebook, X, and YouTube. Overall, The RFL's digital presence during the campaign successfully captured audience attention, particularly through video content.

## Inclusive Playing Offers

Across the inclusive variants of Rugby League, there has been a significant shift in focus from mass participation to specialized, appropriate disabled participation. By prioritizing performance and providing meaningful playing opportunities for defined disabled demographics, participation numbers have decreased slightly overall. However, other indicators, such as PDRL classification, show a steep increase in appropriately engaged participants.

In 2024, Wheelchair Rugby League adopted a category system with three categories defining participation levels: Non-Disabled, Disabled, and Disabled Performance Impaired. While this system is self-certifying in nature, it focuses on safeguarding places on the field for individuals whose physical disabilities impair their ability to perform Wheelchair Rugby League skills. This model also maintains playing opportunities for non-disabled participants and those disabled by societal definitions, ensuring the core demographic of physically disabled players remains the focus in community settings.

Wheelchair RL has also implemented a policy change for junior participants in competitive adult environments, increasing the minimum age of participation to 16+. To support this, 2024 saw a significant increase in junior-specific playing opportunities, delivered centrally at key events throughout the year. These initiatives provided more juniors with meaningful and safe spaces to play and compete in the sport.

Female-focused participation has continued to develop, with increased opportunities to engage in women-only spaces while maintaining participation in the traditional format of the sport. Additionally, a proposed England Futures element has been introduced to the end-of-year internationals, providing women and juniors with a performance space to encourage growth through aspirational playing offers.

The end of the wheelchair season saw a positive increase in participation, the development of new clubs, and expanded playing opportunities, including university engagement. The Super League final achieved another record attendance, and the competition pyramid opened applications for Super League participation over the next three years, confirming growth toward an eight-team competition during this period.

The international window featured England retaining the Fassoulete Kiely Cup in a two-game series, with each team winning on their home soil. England's aggregate points advantage secured the title. Importantly, the home fixture showcased development opportunities through the emerging England pathways for juniors and women's participation.

PDRL experienced a significant policy shift with the introduction of minimum numbers of classified players in community settings. The PDRL footprint expanded to 10 teams regularly participating in the domestic season, split strategically into two divisions based on competitiveness and the number of existing classified players. In the premier division, new competition rules require each team to field at least four classified players. This policy aims to promote classified participation and enhance the competition's credibility as a disability sport by reducing impairment level disparities as a determining factor in outcomes. In the lower division, these policies do not apply, allowing teams to develop without the barrier of meeting minimum classified participation levels.

The season presented anticipated challenges due to the refinement and specialization of appropriate participation offers. Although there was a small overall decrease in participation, there was an increase in classified participants engaging in the domestic offer and in individuals seeking classified status. The finals day at Castleford Tigers' Mend-A-Hose Stadium was well-contested and well-attended, with Wakefield claiming their first championship victory after finishing second for the previous three seasons. Plans for a new representative-level competition in 2025 aim to further develop classified participation.

Supporting these changes, the England Community Lions PDRL team secured its first commercial sponsorship through Mediquip UK, a significant milestone made possible by refined participation policies and the confidence they inspire in investors.

LDRL introduced new checks and challenges in 2024 regarding appropriate participation definitions for the Learning Disability Super League. To support this, the RFL and Community Integrated Care developed robust training schedules and a suite of guidance documents to help foundations determine participant eligibility. This approach ensures the intended demographics have impactful experiences while redirecting others to more suitable opportunities, maximizing the benefits for all players.

Although there was a slight overall decrease in participation due to audience refinement, the season was a success. Highlights included involvement in the Magic Weekend and a finals day at Castleford Tigers' Mend-A-Hose Stadium. The audience is better served through these definitions, with improved safety and safeguarding measures now in place.

Finally, the Tryz program, developed with Access Sport, has continued to thrive. It delivers meaningful, impactful opportunities for juniors through a pan-disability model at new locations across England. This program serves as an excellent signposting opportunity for young people with any disability to enter the sport of Rugby League.

Discussions have begun on how the Tryz program can contribute to the overall disability pyramid for inclusive playing offers, providing juniors with more meaningful opportunities to participate and specialize in a disability variant when appropriate.



### Sustainable Growth

In 2024, we continued our commitment to enhancing volunteer participation and support by implementing a new volunteer strategy. Volunteer engagement grew by 4.3% compared to the previous year, representing an impressive 21% increase since 2022. This growth was largely driven by a significant rise in the number of female volunteers, who increased by 407 individuals. Female volunteers now make up 51% of our registered volunteer workforce.

#### Volunteer Participation

Year	Volunteers Engaged
2022	4,943
2023	5,759
2024	6,005

### Reintroducing National Volunteer Awards

For the first time since COVID-19, the National Volunteer Awards returned in 2024 as part of our new volunteer recognition framework. Eight volunteers from the community game were honoured for their outstanding contributions.

A new presentation approach was piloted, with awards being presented locally among the communities where these volunteers made their impact. This shift created special, feel-good moments by celebrating achievements directly among peers. Given its success, this approach will be continued in 2025.

Additionally, the Services to Community Rugby League Award returned, honouring Michael Turner for his extraordinary contributions spanning five decades.

### Expanding the Try Force Programme

The growth of the Try Force volunteer programme remained steady in 2024, with 125 new sign-ups, bringing the total to 512 registered volunteers. These dedicated individuals collectively contributed 450 volunteer hours, supporting 56 Rugby League events throughout the year.

### Innovative Initiatives and Partnerships

- **Tempo Time Credits Partnership:** In 2024, we launched a partnership with Tempo Time Credits, enabling volunteers to trade time credits for unique experiences and services.
- **Greater Manchester Recruitment Initiative:** Mid-2024 saw the start of a collaborative recruitment project with Greater Manchester Moving and three local community clubs. This initiative aims to replicate the success of previous recruitment efforts with professional club foundations in a community club setting.

The project will generate insights into volunteer motivations and the influence of club environments on recruitment methods, shaping our future strategies.

### Enhanced Volunteer Resources and Development

We continued refreshing our library of online resources to support Rugby League organizations in recruiting, onboarding, and retaining volunteers. In 2025, we will strengthen our collaboration with Buddle (Sport England's club support platform) to offer more learning and development opportunities for volunteers.

## Facilities

Good facilities are essential for increasing participation and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the sport. Several initiatives are currently underway to enhance Rugby League facilities and support community engagement. The Rugby League National Community Facilities Strategy has been published, outlining strategic priorities and necessary investments to support the community game up to 2030.

The total investment through the Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund is £1,776,806. This fund remains the primary source of financial support available to community clubs and foundations, enabling us to address one of the key objectives of the Rugby Football League (RFL) National Community Facilities Strategy: improving the quality of grass pitches across the community game.

In some areas, clubs face challenges in accessing funding due to issues regarding security of tenure. We are actively collaborating with key partners such as the Football Foundation, Sport England, and local authorities to overcome these challenges.

Some clubs have successfully taken responsibility for their own ground maintenance, resulting in improved surface quality and increased playing hours. Others have reduced costs by performing routine maintenance tasks, such as cutting and marking the fields, by using equipment purchased with this fund.

PitchPower has been crucial in helping us understand the quality and availability of pitches across the country. By the end of 2025, we aim to have the majority of community Rugby League sites on the platform, allowing them to access funding if they wish.

In 2024, two capital improvement projects for grass pitches were undertaken through the Multi-Sport Pitch Improvement Fund. These projects were funded based on their commitment to addressing inequalities faced by underrepresented groups. We are excited to see the long-term impact of these completed projects.

Four additional projects are planned for 2025, aligned with the same objectives, and wouldn't be possible without support from Sport England and the Football Foundation.

Further multi-sport investment from these partners has led to the development of several 3G pitches. Notably, 3G pitches at Newton Le Willows and Hull KR have been completed, both of which include Community Rugby League in their usage plans. At the time of writing, another exciting project is underway at East Bierley, with Rugby League at its core. We hope more facilities like this will be developed in 2025 to achieve our strategic goals of providing adequate playing pitches and supporting infrastructure.

Delivering on the RL National Community Facilities Strategy remains a top priority for our work programs in 2025, particularly in ensuring that our playing pitches and ancillary provision are improving to accommodate the growth of the game among all demographics.

Strategic planning has been significant in 2024 and will continue to be vital in 2025. We regularly contribute to Playing Pitch Strategies for all local authorities in England, which aim to protect, preserve, and enhance playing pitches across the country while securing investment through contributions such as Section 106. This work is essential for safeguarding the future of the sport. We are also collaborating closely with the Football Foundation on their Local Football Facility Plans to ensure that Rugby League demand is incorporated into future projects.

We have dedicated much of our time to supporting clubs with their facility development goals. Funding plays a crucial role in these discussions, as does ensuring the proper structure and personnel are in place to implement projects. Community Wellbeing Hubs are making a positive social impact, and having appropriate facilities is central to their viability. As funding becomes scarcer and, in some cases, harder to access, the skillset and versatility of project groups becomes even more critical. We have seen excellent examples of clubs successfully navigating these challenges.

Our partnership with the Grounds Management Association (GMA) has strengthened significantly in 2024, which has been vital for the number of clubs utilizing PitchPower and the detailed data available regarding pitch stock. This relationship is key to the ongoing support provided to the community game and to the growing number of grounds volunteers who work diligently to ensure that games are playable each week.

