

ANNUAL REPORT 2023



CONTENTS

- 3 FROM THE CHAIR**
SIMON JOHNSON ON A YEAR OF DELIVERY AND A CHANGE OF CULTURE WITHIN RUGBY LEAGUE
- 4 CEO WELCOME**
TONY SUTTON REFLECTS ON THE ADVENT OF A NEW ERA IN THE SPORT'S PROUD HISTORY
- 7 ON-FIELD HEROICS**
THE RED ROSE RISES AND THE CONTINUED GROWTH OF THE WOMEN'S AND WHEELCHAIR GAMES
- 11 THE WARMEST OF RECEPTIONS**
MEETING PAULINE STAMPER - THE 'LUCKIEST PERSON TO WORK AT THE RFL'
- 17 A BIG YEAR IN THE MIDDLE**
CHRIS KENDALL ON REALISING HIS WEMBLEY DREAM
- 19 STAYING THE COURSE**
A POSITIVE YEAR FOR MATCH OFFICIAL RETENTION
- 21 MORE THAN JUST A NUMBER**
HARRY HANSON ON WHY DATA HOLDS SO MANY KEYS TO SUCCESS
- 28 SAFE, SECURE AND FUN TO PLAY**
CREATING AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE FOR THE RUGBY LEAGUE FAMILY
- 31 THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX**
JONATHAN DOWLER ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATING THE EDUCATORS
- 33 A NEW COMMERCIAL DAWN**
A BIG FIRST YEAR FOR EVERYONE AT RUGBY LEAGUE COMMERCIAL
- 35 UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF OUR COMMUNITIES**
INCLUDING PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT WAY IS CRITICAL FOR OLIVIA MCDONAGH
- 40 THOUGHTS TURN TO BRAIN HEALTH**
RL CARES TAKES PLAYER WELLBEING DELIVERY TO THE NEXT LEVEL
- 43 FIVE YEARS OF SUCCESS**
CELEBRATING THE STERLING WORK OF THE SPORT'S CHARITIES
- 49 ON THE MONEY**
A DETAILED BREAKDOWN OF THE RFL'S CONSOLIDATED ACCOUNTS FOR 2023



A portrait of a middle-aged man with grey hair, smiling. He is wearing a dark suit jacket, a light pink shirt, and a blue and purple striped tie. The background is a blurred green and grey.

INTRODUCTION CHAIRMAN

If 2021 was a year of ups and downs and seismic change, and 2022 a year of transition, then 2023 was a year of delivery and one when we began to change the culture of our sport.

I had the honour of being re-elected as Chair in 2023 for what will be my final three-year term. There is much that I want to achieve, but I set two visible and clear targets for my term.

The first was to finally make progress with my colleagues on the International Rugby League Board to develop an international calendar and put the steps in place to grow the international game. I was therefore delighted that, in July 2023, the IRL Board agreed a long-term international calendar that can give certainty to nations and partners and provide a base from which to grow the game.

As part of this calendar, England men welcomed Tonga to tour in 2023, and will welcome Samoa in autumn 2024.

After that, England men and women will play a three-match Ashes series against the Kangaroos and Jillaroos in 2025, with Australia hosting both series in the period vacated by the postponement of Rugby League World Cup 2025 in France.

New Zealand men and women will tour England in 2027 and the Kangaroos will tour in 2028.

There will be dedicated northern hemisphere and southern hemisphere Tri-Nations and Four Nations tournaments, a greater emphasis on regional championships and World Cup.

qualifying process, including a new World Series to help nations develop and a change to the World Cups cycle, with the next World Cup for men's, women's and wheelchair teams to be staged in 2026. This will be followed by a World Cup every two years, with a stand-alone women's World Cup in 2028, and a men's World Cup in 2030.

England has continued to support the development of France as a rugby league-playing nation by committing to mid-season internationals for both men and women in 2023, 2024 and 2025.

For the first time in many years, there is now certainty in the International Game.

The other target I set was to change the culture of the game around player safety, diversity and inclusion.

We have refreshed our Inclusion Board under the chairmanship of Jamie Jones Buchanan. And on player safety, as Tony explains in his CEO report, we concluded a 15-month consultation and trial process that led to us introducing 44 safety measures across different levels of the game. All of this is intended to make our game as safe as we can make it in relation to concussive and sub-concussive impacts, and to do so on the basis of data and evidence.

From a governance perspective, the Board in 2024 is diverse in background, skill and experience and able to provide deeper leadership of the issues before the game. Our new Executive leadership is helping to bring a new culture to the organisation. I also led the recruitment to the Board of RL Commercial, recruiting individuals who bring industry-leading and broad experience to support this important part of the realigned structure.

We have continued to show more transparency around what the Board and the RFL does. In addition to the Chair's summary after each Board meeting, we have now committed to publish on the RFL website the minutes of Board meetings of both the RFL and RL Commercial, leaving out sensitive commercial information as necessary. Rugby League has never been so open, and this will bring greater visibility to the work of the Board and the RFL.

We have also moved to holding four RL Council meetings per year, at which the RFL can be questioned and held to account. From autumn 2024, Council meetings will be followed by RL Commercial updates at which RL Commercial will talk about its challenges and achievements and answer questions from clubs. We are moving towards publishing clearer and more visible

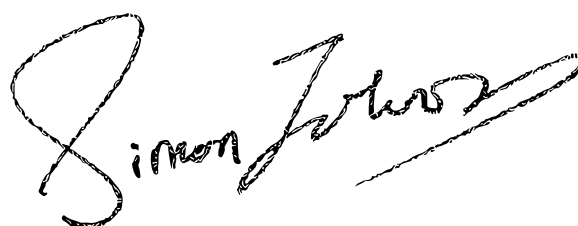
KPIs and to being able to be held accountable against them. The Joint Board working project has created a charter for joint working between the Boards of the RFL and RL Commercial and a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed) model to ensure efficient operation.

I also set out to help the RFL to be more bullish in getting Rugby League more respect in wider sports and government circles. We are well respected as a sport within DCMS, the Princess of Wales Office and Sport England, and play our full part in sporting structures such as the Five Sports, as well as representing sports' interests in the Gambling White Paper. We led the Government's loan programme and helped them to establish the existing structures.

We have been honoured to have hosted our Patron, HRH The Princess of Wales on a number of occasions in the last year, including meeting the World Cup-winning England wheelchair squad, and having a go at a grassroots wheelchair event in Hull.

We set a target and will deliver through 2024 to broaden political relationships into all the parties in the build-up to the General Election and work to maintain strong relationships afterwards.

2023 has been a year of delivery and I am proud to have been given the honour of stewarding the sport for three more years and to try and embed the success of all the steps that we have put in place.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Simon Jones". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.



INTRODUCTION CEO

Following fundamental changes to the governance and organisation of the sport brought forwards in 2022, and with new leadership in place at both the Rugby Football League and RL Commercial, the sport ushered in another era in its history in 2023. Now that both organisations are embedded and operating out of the new RL HQ at the Etihad Campus in Manchester, the co-ordinated delivery of the game's strategic objectives started with a flash in early 2023 as St Helens won the World Club Challenge in a thunderstorm in Sydney at Penrith's BlueBet Stadium in mid-February.

On the field, Saints made more history in August when they won the first women's Challenge Cup final to be played at Wembley Stadium – Jodie Cunningham and Emily Rudge, who have grown together from teenage trailblazers in Warrington to icons of Women's Rugby League with club and country, lifted the trophy together after climbing the famous steps to the Royal Box.

They were followed a few hours later by Leigh Leopards, fairytale winners of the Betfred Challenge Cup, 52 years after the club's only previous Wembley triumph. For Leigh, 2023 proved as successful off the field as on it, with record-breaking crowds flocking to Leigh Sports Village where every match became an event, and Adrian Lam's team competed at the top end of the Super League table all season to secure a play-off place.

In the men's Super League, Leigh were one of four teams from west of the Pennines who dominated the top six. Yorkshire's sole representatives were Hull KR, their heartbroken victims at Wembley, who bounced back to finish fourth and beat the Leopards in the first round of the play-offs - but a semi-final at Wigan Warriors, who had secured the League Leaders' Shield on a dramatic final Friday, proved a bridge too far.

Meanwhile St Helens, who had lost to Leigh in a compelling Challenge Cup semi-final and finished third in the table, beat Warrington in their opening play-off on a night when James Roby made the last of so many appearances at the Totally Wicked Stadium.

But there was to be no Old Trafford farewell for Roby, and no fifth consecutive title for St Helens, as the following week their season ended in Perpignan – with Sam Tomkins, another great of the Super League era who had known for some time that this would be his last season, securing a famous win for Catalans Dragons with a stunning individual try.

That set up a delicious Grand Final script as Tomkins faced the Wigan club with whom he made his name. The Warriors were predictably unsentimental, however, shutting out the Dragons 12-4 to secure their sixth Super League title. Jake Wardle, their increasingly influential left centre, won the Harry Sunderland Trophy as player of the match ahead of his team-mate Bevan French, who had earlier been named the Steve Prescott MBE Man of Steel for 2023.

The following day on the other side of Manchester, Wigan's wheelchair team produced a much less predicted victory over Leeds Rhinos to win their first Super League title – maintaining the 2023 theme of Red Rose triumphing over White. However, there were notable exceptions.

York Valkyrie, like Leigh Leopards playing in their first season under a new brand name, finally won the Betfred Women's Super League title they had coveted for some time, beating Leeds Rhinos 16-6 in front of a new competition-record crowd of 4,547 at their own LNER Community Stadium. Sinead Peach, the outstanding contributor to York's dominant season in which they also won the League Leaders' Shield, had already been named Woman of Steel.

Halifax Panthers ensured one Yorkshire winner on Finals Day at Wembley, holding off Batley

Bulldogs 12-10 despite a spellbinding late try from Elliot Kear to become the fourth club to win the AB Sundecks 1895 Cup.

And it was also a year of significant achievement for two clubs well away from British rugby league's traditional northern heartlands.

In addition to reaching their second Betfred Super League Grand Final, Catalans Dragons won the Betfred Wheelchair Challenge Cup for the first time in their history, beating Leeds Rhinos 66-20 at the English Institute of Sport in Sheffield.

And back in the running game, London Broncos bounced back to Super League after a three-year absence with an irresistible late season run which culminated in an 18-14 win against Toulouse Olympique in the Betfred Championship Grand Final.





REVIEW OF 2023

As Sir Lindsay Hoyle, the Speaker of the House of Commons and in his role as RFL President, reflected with only a hint of triumphalism when he addressed the RFL President's Ball in Leeds in January 2024 – the previous year, 2023, would go down in Rugby League terms as a very good one for what used to be Lancashire.

It started with St Helens winning the World Club Challenge against Penrith Panthers in their western Sydney stronghold - the first British winners since Wigan in 2017, and only the second northern hemisphere team to triumph overseas, again following Wigan in 1994.

Saints made more history in August, when they won the first women's Challenge Cup final to be played at Wembley Stadium – Jodie Cunningham and Emily Rudge, who have grown together from teenage trailblazers in Warrington to icons of women's rugby league with club and country, lifting the trophy together after climbing the famous steps to the Royal Box.

They were followed a few hours later by Leigh Leopards, fairytale winners of the Betfred Challenge Cup, 52 years since the club's only previous Wembley triumph, and about 10 months after their owner Derek Beaumont had provoked some ridicule by unveiling a new nickname and brand identity for one of the founder members of the Northern Union following their promotion to the Super League.

For Beaumont, 2023 proved as successful off the field as on it, with record-breaking crowds flocking to the Leigh Sports Village where every match became an event, and Adrian Lam's team competed at the top end of the Super League table all season to secure a play-off place.

There was more history on that unforgettable day at Wembley as Lam's son, Lachlan kicked the first golden point drop-goal in a Challenge Cup final to secure the Lance Todd Trophy as player of the match and follow his dad as a Challenge Cup winner.

Back in Super League, Leigh were one of four teams from west of the Pennines dominating the top six. Yorkshire's sole representatives were Hull KR, their heartbroken victims at Wembley, who bounced back to finish fourth and beat the Leopards in the first round of the play-offs - but a semi-final at Wigan Warriors, who had secured the League Leaders' Shield on a dramatic final Friday, proved a bridge too far.

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Halifax Panthers ensured one Yorkshire winner on Finals Day at Wembley, holding off Batley Bulldogs 12-10 - despite a spellbinding late try from Elliot Kear - to become the fourth club to win the AB Sundecks 1895 Cup.

And it was also a year of significant achievement for two clubs well away from British Rugby League's traditional northern heartlands. In addition to reaching their second Betfred Super League Grand Final, Catalans Dragons won the Betfred Wheelchair Challenge Cup for the first time in their history, beating Leeds Rhinos 66-20 at the English Institute of Sport in Sheffield.



And back in the men's running game, London Broncos bounced back to the Super League after a three-year absence with an irresistible late-season run which culminated in an 18-14 win against Toulouse Olympique in the Betfred Championship Grand Final.

London's wheelchair team, the Roosters, also claimed a significant prize when their inspirational international Lewis King was the first winner of the Wheels of Steel, a new award for the outstanding wheelchair performer of the season which was presented on the same night as the Men and Women of Steel were recognised in Manchester.

Dewsbury Rams claimed another title for Yorkshire as they dominated Betfred League One to secure automatic promotion and were joined by Doncaster, who beat North Wales Crusaders in the Play-Off Final. But two Yorkshire teams had to cope with the disappointment of relegation as Keighley Cougars dropped from the Championship alongside Newcastle Thunder, and Wakefield Trinity finished bottom of Super League to end a 25-year residency in the elite competition – although by the time they went down, a takeover was well underway to breathe new life and optimism into the club.

The international season featured four wins out of four for Shaun Wane's England men, two out of two for Stuart Barrow's England women, and although Tom Coyd's Wheelchair World Cup winners were the only England team to suffer a defeat in 2023, that came on a day when Wheelchair Rugby League was the biggest winner as a big crowd and a significant television audience on BBC2 relished the fantastic atmosphere at Leeds's First Direct Arena – with France claiming deserved revenge for the defeat they had suffered in that World Cup final 12 months earlier.

Even then, England bounced back impressively to square a two-match series the following weekend with a 34-18 win at the Palais des Sports in Marseille.

Wane had appointed George Williams as his new captain before the mid-season international against France, and Williams opened up with a hat-trick on his home club ground in Warrington as a youthful England team romped to a 64-0 win, with the Leeds wing Ash Handley also claiming a treble.

A three-Test series against Tonga at the end of the season promised a much tougher challenge but England bounced back from the disappointment of the 2022 World Cup semi-final, playing

powerful and clinical rugby to win 22-18 in St Helens, 14-4 in Huddersfield and 26-4 at Headingley, the latter a fitting end to Elliott Whitehead's outstanding international career. In the one-off women's international that was played as the first half of a double header at Headingley, another second-row, Wigan's Vicky Molyneux, also made an emotional farewell in a 60-0 victory over Wales.

STAFF FOCUS



As important as the decisions taken within it are, the Boardroom is rarely the most influential room in any large office environment.

By the time executives and visitors reach a business's inner sanctum, their moods and opinions have quite often been shaped already by the response to them stepping through the front door.

Those entering Rugby League's HQ at the Etihad campus in Manchester cannot fail to form a positive opinion about the governing body when they are met at reception by Pauline Stamper.

"I am the luckiest person at the RFL because I get to meet absolutely everybody," said Pauline. "I'm the first port of call for anyone who comes through the door and it's my job to make sure we're friendly and we're welcoming."

"It's a lovely place to work and a lovely place to be. We want people to go away having had a good experience and we want them to come back."

Pauline joined the RFL in 2022 after working at Manchester Airport for 20 years as a customer services representative. Her departure from the airport came unexpectedly, and in touching circumstances.

"My mum came to stay with us at Christmas, which was very unusual because she was very independent and rarely, if ever stayed away from home," remembered Pauline. "I was working on Boxing Day and got up at 1.00am having gone to bed at 10.30 on Christmas Day."

"Mum was still up and she said to me 'Pauline, you need to stop doing this, it's not good for you.' It was the first time she'd seen the kind of hours I worked. Despite all the silly hours, I loved my job but I got her point."

"Eight days later, mum passed away suddenly and I took it as a sign so I resigned straight away."

"We'd already paid off the mortgage, the kids had left home and I didn't really see myself working again until I saw the job vacancy at the RFL. I live just four miles away and I thought it sounded like a good place to work. I wasn't wrong!"

Pauline admits that her knowledge of Rugby League is limited, even though her in-laws are all lifelong fans: her husband, John hails from Dearham near Maryport in Cumbria.

"I've got to know a lot of the players and match officials over the last few years and they're all lovely people," said Pauline.

"I'm sure we get other famous people coming through the door all the time and I don't realise who they are: I just try to be as welcoming as I can to everyone."

"One of the nicest things about working here is the friendships you make with colleagues. I often take people under my wing: I like to think I'm a good judge of character and if I spot that someone isn't having the best of days, I'll make time to have a quiet chat."

"Some people come through to have their lunch with me and we build a good bond."

"Family is important to me: me and John always jokes that we're a bit boring because we put family and friends first, when we're not on holiday that is!"

"We like to go to Florida a couple of times a year, and sometimes to Dubai. But I always look forward to coming back to work."

"I'm dead lucky, aren't I?"

ENGLAND

PERFORMANCE UNIT



The RFL's Head of Female Pathways, Stuart Barrow was appointed head coach of the senior women's team in 2023.

Stuart's first international came early in his tenure with a double-header held alongside the men's team at The Halliwell Jones Stadium in Warrington in April. England played France and completed a convincing 64-0 victory, with performance data showing a marked improvement on previous internationals. Later that year, a Yorkshire vs Lancashire Origin fixture was held with all Senior and Knights squad members involved with the aim of getting a significant performance outcome from a modified game. The Origin game provided Stuart with invaluable performance and selection information for the second international of the year, which came in early November against Wales. The game maintained the progression of the women's game at international level with a 60-0 victory at Headingley.

The men's pathway ran a three-match Yorkshire vs Lancashire Origin series at Academy level for players aged 16 to 18 who are part of the RFL's professional pathway. The series saw two victories for Lancashire, with the second game ending in a draw. In total, 76 players and 14 staff members from 10 clubs were exposed to the methodology of how we are looking to develop England players of the future. The games were serviced by each county holding three training sessions in the week of the games to illustrate a playing philosophy to the players and coaches, which is reflective of the England playing and coaching model. Following the Origin series, 23 of those players were selected in the England Academy squad for the July international against French Espoirs (Under-19s), the game being played in St Gaudens, France, where England came out on top with a 33-20 win.

Shaun Wane appointed George Williams as his new captain before the mid-season international against France. Williams opened up with a hat-trick of tries on his home club ground in Warrington as a youthful England team romped to a 64-0 win, with the Leeds winger Ash Handley also scoring three tries.

A three-Test series against Tonga at the end of the season promised a much tougher challenge but England bounced back from the disappointment of the 2022 World Cup semi-final, playing powerful and clinical rugby to win 22-18 in St Helens, 14-4 in Huddersfield and 26-4 at Headingley, the latter a fitting end to Elliott Whitehead's outstanding international career.

The world champion England Wheelchair team enjoyed a great year in 2023 as interest in the

game exploded on the back of the breakout in November 2022, when 1.5 million people watched the Wheelchair World Cup Final. Players and staff up and down the country worked hard to promote and raise exposure. Attendance doubled for the Betfred Challenge Cup final and Grand Final in Sheffield and Manchester. Catalans Dragons and Wigan Warriors were the respective winners.

This resulted in huge growth, doubling the number of teams and participants. Almost 100 female players registered, making the game even more inclusive. This was only possible because of the investment from the RLWC2021 Created By programme, and by the RFL investing in over 400 wheelchairs.

Another first was the European Club Challenge which saw Halifax travel to Perpignan to take on French champions, Catalans Dragons. A scorcher on August Bank Holiday weekend resulted in a classic game, drawn 32-32.

The England programme continued throughout the season, providing pathway opportunities for new players, coaches, match officials and volunteers. A groundbreaking Test match at the First Direct Arena in Leeds drew over 2,000 spectators and a viewership of nearly 400,000 on the BBC. The French were too strong and overcame England 43-34. The return in Marseille three weeks later saw a magnificent performance from England who secured the Fassolette-Kielty Trophy on French soil with a 34-18 victory

During 2023, the EPU Science and Medical team continued to undertake a comprehensive programme of research, in collaboration with Leeds Beckett University. The overall aim is to optimise player performance whilst reducing the risk of concussion, and sub-clinical head impacts. The research created evidence to underpin the 44 recommendations made by the Brain Health Committee to the RFL Board, which were hugely significant for the sport.

COMMUNITY

RUGBY LEAGUE



The participation data collated at the end of the 2023 season is significant as it represents the first opportunity to assess the potential legacy of RLWC2021 in participation terms.

As with any major tournament, an increase in participation is one of the key factors used to measure success. With the RLWC2021 being the most inclusive tournament delivered so far, maximising growth amongst women and girls and wheelchair RL participants was a key focus.

Whilst we have seen a year-on-year increase in participants since the two Covid-affected years of 2020 and 2021, we are also clearly seeing no immediate bounce back to pre-Covid levels but a more graduated year-on-year increase as witnessed in the three years prior to the pandemic. Clearly the pandemic changed people's sporting habits and not all those habits have returned as restrictions have eased.

The overall number of participants in our core community settings has increased by five per cent. The only area which reported a decline was men's open age, which decreased by three per cent and remains a cause for increased focus. More positively, the most significant growth continues to be amongst women and girls (+33 per cent) and our inclusive playing offers of physical disability RL, learning disability RL and wheelchair RL which averaged an increase of 51 per cent.

Wheelchair RL grew a remarkable 74 per cent. The numbers of participants in social variants of the sport continue to increase, including 10,500 taking part in Try Tag Rugby. The second largest source of participants comes from the education sector and again we have seen a five per cent increase in the number of players in schools, colleges and universities.

Throughout 2023, the RFL Brain Health Committee met to review data from the law modification trials, other scientific and medical research and consider the impact of potential changes to rules, regulations and playing calendars designed to safeguard players and the future of the sport. A total of 44 recommendations were made and are being implemented throughout 2024.

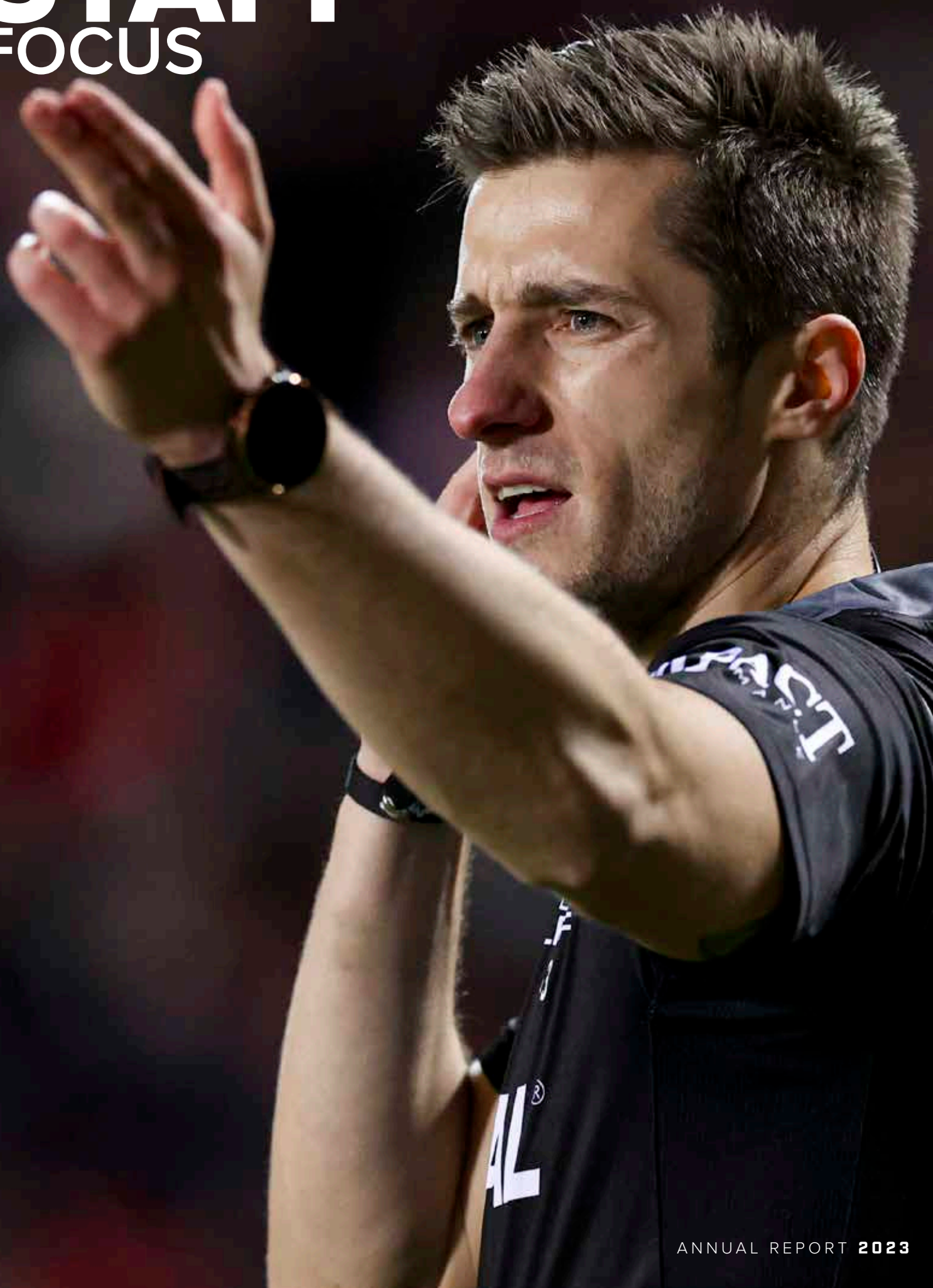
Community game environments remain a challenge. Various initiatives designed to improve touchline behaviours resulted in a slight reduction in the number of misconduct cases in 2023. Our commitment to delivering a safe and inclusive sport for all to enjoy remains an absolute priority.

In addition to challenging touchlines, the financial climate has also proved difficult for clubs who we continue to support daily through a variety of initiatives. Our club support provision has been enhanced through delivering on our commitment to create a National Volunteering Strategy. We have also significantly increased our data capabilities, leading to more informed decision making and a more targeted approach to supporting under-represented groups.

Supporting our communities through our dedicated Social Impact Team remains a focus. We have continued to deliver a variety of programmes supporting our people and communities including employability, reduction in offending, and wellbeing initiatives. We are continuing to make significant progress setting up a new central charitable entity which will maximize the sport's proven ability to deliver social impact through Our League Life, our social impact brand.

Facilities play a key role in maximising our impact in communities. We now have 10 clubs that have completed their Community Wellbeing Hub induction and are working to become fully established wellbeing hubs. Whilst the Created-By Facilities fund linked to the RLWC2021 has closed, with the ongoing support of Sport England and the Football Foundation over £1.5m has been invested into community facilities throughout 2023.

STAFF FOCUS



Chris Kendall had long dreamed of stepping out onto the hallowed turf of Wembley Stadium in the footsteps of his sporting heroes.

As a youngster, it was as a fan of the all-conquering Bradford Bulls that Chris headed to the national stadium every year to enjoy an occasion that has fired the imagination of generations of people for almost a century.

And in 2023, Chris finally realised his ambition by taking centre stage at Wembley to referee an epic Betfred Challenge Cup final, won in the most dramatic circumstances by Leigh Leopards with a golden-point drop-goal which broke the hearts of Hull Kingston Rovers.

"I've been a rugby league fan as long as I can remember and have special memories of going to Wembley every year with the family," said Chris.

"To be able to run out at Wembley in a Challenge Cup final really was a dream come true: I was in no doubt what it meant to be there, and I feel truly privileged to be part of the history of such a great competition.

"It was my chance to make my family proud, make my wife proud and it meant the world to me."

Chris had become a Grade 1 referee 10 years earlier and is now one of the sport's most experienced match officials: 2023 also saw him referee the third England vs Tonga Test and video referee the Betfred Super League Grand Final.

Having realised as an Academy player with Huddersfield Giants that he was unlikely to make it as a player at the highest level, Chris put all his focus and energy into becoming a full-time match official and his hard work and commitment continue to reap rewards for the former Newsome Magpies junior.

Another highlight for Chris from 2023 was the Match Officials department moving to its new home within the RFL's HQ at the Etihad Campus in Manchester.

"Relocating to the Etihad and the lift in professionalism that has come from being in such a world class facility was a massive step forward for us as a department," he said.

"Previously we'd been in the cabins at the back of Red Hall and at Ruskin, which left us feeling part of, but separate to the rest of the RFL, but the move to Etihad has enabled us to integrate with the rest of the organisation."

The match officials usually spend Mondays and Tuesdays at the office working on video reviews and training, but the rest of the week can see them at a range of locations and venues, both in the UK and across in France.

"We have to be very flexible: we don't usually know which games we're officiating that weekend until the Monday," said Chris.

"The return of Phil Bentham as Head of Match Officials in February (2024) has been fantastic for the department. It was a massive loss when he left but he's come back after a couple of years at the FA and is really making a difference.

"When I was starting out as a match official I looked up to referees like Phil, Robert Hicks and James Child and I'm conscious that when we go out to the community and meet junior referees it's important to act like a role model. "We want the young officials coming through to think you're a good person as well as a good referee."



MATCH OFFICIALS



A total of 23 match official courses took place in 2023. The majority of these were held at community and professional clubs with a small number also taking place virtually. Of the 385 attendees, 97 were females completing their match officials course. In a slight change to 2022, we amended the way that we record an official as 'retained' so that they only received that status after completing three community fixtures, all under the guidance of our match official societies. The retention rate for 2023 was 31.68 per cent, an increase of more than five per cent on 2022.

With the positive increase in match officials retention, the department set a target to have 550 active match officials before the end of 2024. This was always going to be an ambitious target, but one that was achievable.

The year also saw the department expand its tutor workforce to ensure that the planned increase in course delivery and content could be supported. A group of 16 RFL Match Official Course Tutors have been recruited to ensure quality and consistency when delivering courses. The match official course theory material was also re-written and refreshed again to help improve the learners' experience.

After the pandemic, the sport created dedicated regional centres of excellence with all of our regional training centres beginning to thrive, producing record numbers of attendees across Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumbria. Regional managers are now assisting with recruitment, retention and development across all parts of the country.

With the full launch of headcams in 2023, the 200 cameras purchased were rolled in to the community game without major event. All match officials were aware this should become part of their matchday kit.

Many match official societies forged partnerships with professional clubs. Leeds RLRS now use AMT Headingley Stadium as their base for monthly development meetings and training sessions, whilst Wigan RLRS have continued their longstanding partnership with Wigan Warriors.

The RFL and ACME Whistles extended their partnership to move to create a home for rugby league match officials. ACME plan to create a series of short films on what it takes to become an elite match official, following the elite group from pre-season all the way to the Betfred Super League Grand Finals in October, and were exceptionally supportive with the restart of the Match Officials Awards evening.

Performance

During 2023, the RFL undertook a review of the performance structures for the department. Whilst this took place, Dave Elliott undertook an interim role as Head of Match Officials and managed several changes to the structure of the pathway, performance assessment and recruitment needs for officials. In addition, the department relocated to the home of the sport at the Etihad Campus.

It is expected the learnings from that review will improve the standard, depth and quality of officiating in 2024 and beyond.

Achievements

Liam Moore and Liam Rush refereed the men's and women's Super League Grand Finals. Chris Kendall and James Vella were appointed to take charge of the men's and women's Challenge Cup finals which were both staged at Wembley for the first time as part of festival of rugby league.

Jack Smith was appointed to referee the 1895 Cup Final and the Championship Grand Final.

He joined Chris and Liam in refereeing the major internationals that took place in the northern hemisphere when England played France (mid-season) and Samoa in a three-match series in the autumn.

James Vella became the 51st referee to take charge of a men's Super League match.

STAFF FOCUS



Sherlock Holmes never got to play or watch a Northern Union game, but the world's greatest detective would not fail to be impressed by the work being done by the RFL's team of analysts.

For the governing body, access to good, reliable information is essential, as it was for Sherlock Holmes, who once exclaimed "Data, data, data: I can't make bricks without clay!" and shrewdly advised that "It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data."

Much of the data produced and shared across the RFL comes from Junior Data Analyst Harry Hanson, working alongside his colleagues Matt Turner and Director of Insight and Strategic Projects Alison O'Brien.

Harry joined the RFL in 2022 as an apprentice and has developed into a valued and important member of a team that sources, processes and shares information, statistics and data across the organisation.

"We provide a wide range of data for both the professional and community games," said Harry. "For example, a lot of the work I do for the community game helps the RFL identify which clubs are doing well and which may need additional support.

"If a club is losing players, the information we can access will help our staff determine what help is needed.

"We operate a system called Gameday which all participants use to register their personal data: every time they play or switch clubs that information is updated, providing us with an accurate picture of what is happening at community level.

"For the professional game, we produce lots of data around viewing figures. Via an outside company which has access to the BARB database that all broadcasters use, we are able to benchmark and drill down into the finer details of the audience for particular matches such as cumulative figures, trends and demographic breakdowns.

"The data in itself is interesting but the key is how the departments within the RFL are able to utilise it."

Harry works out of the Etihad office three days a week and from home near Stockport on Mondays and Fridays.

"We're a small team but we work with colleagues from just about every department in the organisation," he said. "We're always

getting people coming to us asking for all kinds of information and data, and it's great that we're able to help colleagues. That, for me, is the best thing about my job."

With so much information passing through his fingertips every day, it could be difficult to identify a favourite data set from his time at the RFL, but Harry is quick to respond when asked.

"The growth we're continuing to see in the women's and girls' game is hugely impressive," said Harry. "There was a lot happening throughout 2023 and that growth shows no sign of slowing down.

"That's testimony not just to the appeal of rugby league for women and girls but to the hard work and dedication of the RFL's community team."

HEADLINE

STATISTICS



Participation

Total participants increased 5.3 per cent from 2022 to 2023: this growth was driven by an increase in the number of players in junior age groups regardless of gender.

The most significant growth continues to be amongst women and girls with over 7,000 now playing within community clubs. Recently-introduced RFL programmes such as 'Rugbees' and 'Futures' have contributed significantly to this accelerated growth.

The one area of concern remains men's open age numbers. This trend is not unique to rugby league and many of the challenges are societal. However, we are doing all we can to understand why transitioning players from Youth to Open Age and retaining players in this setting is particularly challenging as we seek to put appropriate interventions in place.

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

The second largest source of participants comes from the education sector. Compared with the end of 2022, we saw a five per cent increase in the number of participants across schools, colleges, and universities.

Our social forms of Rugby League also contribute significant numbers of participants to our total number of active participants. Overall, we saw a 13 per cent increase since the end of 2022. Our partners Try Tag Rugby contribute significantly to the overall total of 13,982 with 10,596 players.

Viewing

Men's Betfred Super League

- 25 Betfred Super League games broadcast on Sky Sports and Channel 4 peaked at over 200,000 audiences, 13 games at over 300,000, one game at over 400,000 and one game over 500,000.
- 2023 Magic Weekend was the second-highest Magic Weekend TV audience on record, with a total of 804,740 viewers.

Men's Championship

- The Championship Grand Final, Toulouse Olympique XIII vs London Broncos attracted a combined audience of 32,992 across Viaplay Sports and L'Equipe.

Men's League 1

- The League 1 promotion final, Doncaster RLFC vs North Wales Crusaders attracted 13,907 on the Sportsman, up 36 per cent from 2022's promotion final.

Women's Betfred Super League

- Five Betfred Super League games were broadcast on Sky Sports in 2023, with a cumulative match audience of 200,000.
- Leeds Rhinos vs St Helens peaked at 128,000 the highest for a women's Super League game on record.

Challenge Cup

- The men's Challenge Cup from round 6 to the final attracted a cumulative audience of 3.9m across the BBC and Viaplay Sports, with the final peaking at 1.2m.
- The Women's Challenge Cup final peaked at 308,500, up +0.2 per cent on 2022.

Internationals

- The men's mid-season International against France peaked at 134,000 on Sky Sports.
- The men's Test series vs Tonga saw a cumulative match audience of 1.9m.
- The women's mid-season International against France peaked at 99,000 on Sky Sports.
- The women's international against Wales peaked at 262,000 on BBC.

Attendances

Men's Betfred Super League

- The opening round average attendance of 9,832 was the highest since 2016.
- 2023 saw the fastest time taken for the cumulative attendance to reach one million since 2011 (Round 20).
- The 2023 cumulative attendance was up 10.5 per cent on 2022 (1,607,225 vs 1,454,107 – whole season).
- The cumulative attendance was up 11.3 per cent on 2022 (1,436,021 v 1,290,148) with 156 games played in the regular season.

Men's Championship

- The 2023 cumulative regular season attendance was up 9.6 per cent on 2022 (365,075 v 332,976) with 182 games played.

Men's League 1

- The promotion play-off final attendance was up 135 per cent on 2022 (2,549 v 1,086)

Women's Betfred Super League

- The attendance of 5,308 for the opening game, Leeds Rhinos vs York Valkyrie, part of a double-header with Leeds men v Huddersfield, was a new record.

- The cumulative attendance was 45,603.
The 2023 Grand Final saw a record attendance of 4,547, up +111 per cent on 2022.

Women's Challenge Cup

- The 2023 Challenge Cup final, which was a double-header with the men's final, saw an attendance of 58,213.

Internationals

- The cumulative attendance for the England vs Tonga Test series was 39,585.

OUR LEAGUE

ACTIVE



Our League Active

Our League Active is the participation membership scheme that the RFL launched in 2022 to promote the sustainability and development of the Community Game.

Members secure a wide range of benefits, including personal accident and public liability insurance, access to a personalised dashboard and Our League content, prize draw and partner offers.

The budgeted contribution from Our League Active in 2023 was £495,339. This was based on a projected revenue of £663,000 with insurance and budgeted costs of £167,661. The actual total amount of income received during 2023 was £626,672 with 38,269 individuals contributing.

Participation levels in community clubs, where most of Our League Active members are based, increased by five per cent. This growth has been driven by an increase in the number of players in junior age groups and women. We witnessed a decline in the total number of registered players across the 12 open-age competitions during 2023. This is significant from an Our League Active income perspective given adults have historically paid double that of a junior member.

When the Our League Active Scheme was launched in 2022, it was agreed there would be no review or increase in fees before the 2024 season. The Community Board accepted an RFL Executive Board recommendation during September 2023 that the fees be increased by £1 across the board.

OURLEAGUE
ACTIVE
SUPPORTING COMMUNITY RUGBY LEAGUE



SAFEGUARDING



Ensuring the sport remains committed to the welfare and protection of its participants, especially children and adults at risk, remains a key priority for Rugby League. As has been seen from the recent high-profile reviews into other sports, getting the culture and governance of the sport at all levels is critical to ensure that participants can play and participate in a safe and supportive environment.

the sport. As such, a significant financial commitment was made to purchase referee head cameras to record matches and enable better evidence and data capture of what was happening in the community game. The results of that investment saw an improvement in adult behaviour with fewer reported cases. That said, this area remains an area where we must strive to continue to improve. The below table sets out the reduction in these cases since 2021:

The emphasis on improving the environment for children remains a key strategic priority for

	End of Year 2021	End of Year 2022	End of Year 2023	Difference
Reduction in Match Official abuse	200	200	108	46%
Improved behaviour of touchlines in the Community Game/ Improved behaviour of coaches and players	1010	817	590	28%

The Safeguarding Case Management Group did however record the highest number of cases in a year for a third successive year. The breakdown of cases is set out below:



The annual Safeguarding Conference in 2023 took place in January. It was held at Headingley Stadium, Leeds with a record number of people attending. Topics covered included safer recruitment and managing challenging behaviour.

The CPSU annual audit into the RFL's Safeguarding procedures went ahead in August 2023 and was attended by Kerry Simmons and Robert Hicks. The audit was very positive and the RFL maintained the highest rating of 'Met'.

The Safeguarding Manager has continued to maintain positive relationships and engagement with the CPSU and attends all training, conferences and lead officer forums.

The RFL continues to be considered as a sport demonstrating Best Practice and seeks to demonstrate a positive example as a sport and influence positive behaviours in other sports where possible.

The CPSU continue to acknowledge the work and support of the RFL in assisting their Unit.

2023 in Numbers

1,562 people completed safeguarding education courses (SPC and TTL) with 58 courses carried out in person

15 per cent of all safeguarding cases related to unacceptable language/behaviour whilst 21 per cent of cases related to verbal/emotional abuse.

Integrity Report 2023

The UKAD Assurance Framework is the primary mechanism through which NGBs demonstrate to UKAD their compliance with the UK's National Anti-Doping Policy. The Assurance Framework outlines a number of mandatory requirements and provides NGBs with clear instructions on how they can meet them. The RFL was able to demonstrate its compliance with the framework.

In respect of gambling-related activity, there is no over-arching body ensuring compliance with standards. However, the RFL has an equivalent implementation plan for this area.

In 2023, the RFL continued to ensure it complied with its implementation plans.

2023 in Numbers

100 per cent of professional players and athlete support personnel completed education on anti-doping and gambling policies.

672 samples were collected for testing by UKAD.

TaCKLE Project and Academy Law Trial

Throughout 2023, the RFL and its research partner Leeds Beckett University ran a number of projects and trials with the aim to better understand the concussive and sub-concussive impact on participants who play Rugby League. A coach-led research project took place to reduce head on head collisions in the Women's Super League, which saw a sizeable reduction across the intervention.

The Academy Law Trial to reduce the legal height of the tackle resulted in a reduction by a third of contact with the head and lower head acceleration events.

The various trials and projects resulted in the RFL Board implementing the 44 recommendations proposed by the Brain Health Sub-Committee. These will protect the long-term health of players and make the sport more accessible for all.

STAFF FOCUS



Jonathan Dowler joined the governing body in May 2022 after working as a gym manager at Virgin Active in Salford, a move which saw him reconnect with a sport that had been an intermittent part of his life.

Although he grew up in Hensingham near Whitehaven, it wasn't until he moved away to university in Northumberland and Durham to study sport development and management that he caught the 'rugby league bug.'

"I'd always loved the sport and really began to appreciate how much I missed it when I played at uni in Northumberland," said Jonathan.

"When my wife got a job offer in Manchester, we moved to the city and I put in a couple of applications for different vacancies at the RFL before securing the position of Education Officer. Thankfully, persistence pays off!"

Jonathan's role sees him working with schools, colleges, universities and the Yorkshire and North West Counties schools competitions. "I don't get involved in the day-to-day running of the competitions, it's more about providing support and guidance where it's needed," he said.

"I also work with the national development team to collate all the regional results and put them into the Champion Schools structure. "The period between February and July is busy for us: we set up a series of schools festivals and have at least one or two competitions running every week, in a wide range of age groups.

"One of the most rewarding aspects of my job came in 2023 when we had an all-female team of match officials taking control of Year 10 games. That was an important milestone."

Jonathan is quick to respond when asked what he enjoys most about his role with the RFL. "Problem solving! You have to come up with solutions to all kinds of unexpected challenges and I love that," he said.

"We're all very supportive of the people we work with: if someone is passionate about an issue, or keen to give something new a go, colleagues get behind them and help to make things work.

"That's one of the reasons I was keen to get into sports development. It challenges your thinking. I like the thought processes that go into working out how we get more people involved in the sport.

"One solution is to teach them. Unfortunately we are not blessed with a lot of people who want to, or know how to, coach Rugby League in schools. Teachers are under enormous pressure and young people often miss out on what should be an essential part of their school life.

"That's why we are increasingly going into universities and teacher training colleges to engage with students on PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) courses. They have an important role to play in enabling children to discover the benefits of playing Rugby League." The rewarding nature of Jonathan's role with the RFL hit home at Wembley in 2023 at the end of the Steven Mullaney Memorial Game for Year 10 boys, the traditional Challenge Cup final curtain-raiser.

"The game was won by Archbishop Sentamu Academy from Hull and the first thing their players did when the whistle went was to go over to the players from Bedford High and console them," said Jonathan.

"That was a special thing to see, a real golden nugget moment because it reminds you how special the people who play Rugby League really are, no matter their age."

COMMERCIAL REPORT



The start of 2023 saw the inception of RL Commercial following realignment - meaning that all commercial rights for Rugby League in the UK sat within the joint venture.

Our commercial team have therefore been able to deliver rights across all properties of the sport – and in October, in the build-up to the Betfred Super League Grand Finals, we were delighted to announce a new long-term agreement with Betfred which is the largest ever for Rugby League in the Northern Hemisphere.

This followed the announcement of a new three-year broadcast partnership with Sky Sports, and maintained the unique breadth and depth of Rugby League's partnership with Betfred, incorporating properties from the men's, women's and wheelchair game.

It means that Betfred will continue as title partners for three Super Leagues, three Challenge Cups, and three England teams – in addition to the Championship and League One.

We confirmed a 25 per cent increase in revenue on the previous agreement, and there was tangible evidence of Betfred's commitment to all forms of the sport when England faced France in a Wheelchair International at the First Direct Arena in Leeds, on a state-of-the-art floor which was funded by Betfred as part of the new deal, and will be of huge benefit to Wheelchair Rugby League in the coming years – surely a first for sport.

We were also pleased to agree new deals with long-term partners Northern – the rail operators – and Sherwin-Williams via their Ronseal brand, the latter continuing a specific partnership with the match officials.

The most significant new partnership of the year was launched with Smart Energy GB - the independent, non-profit organisation that helps households and small businesses across Great Britain to understand how smart meters can benefit them, their families and the environment.

It was a topical deal, given the issues surrounding the cost of living and specifically rising fuel costs – and has been predominantly data-driven, offering digital assets across the sport with some exciting content released featuring players from the 12 Betfred Super League clubs.



STAFF FOCUS



Unlocking the potential that exists within Rugby League communities is a major focus for the RFL's Talent Inclusion Officer Olivia McDonagh. Having joined the organisation in 2022, Olivia brings both passion and unswerving commitment to a role which sets out to engage the sport with people it has traditionally found difficult to reach.

Over the years, many clubs have struggled to involve young people from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities on their doorsteps, for example, and part of Olivia's remit is finding new ways to break down the barriers to wider inclusivity.

"There is so much potential out there, so much scope to do so many things," said Olivia.

"We know that there is an enormous amount of talent that remains untapped and in my mind there are no limits to what we can achieve. We just need to work out how!"

Olivia grew up in Warrington and after completing a Masters degree in Corporate Governance and Business Ethics found herself working in recruitment, a career move which never felt right for her.

"Recruitment just wasn't for me. I have a real passion for inclusion and diversity and when the role at the RFL came up I knew it was just what I wanted to do," she said.

"I may not have known much about sport but I knew about inclusion and I had no doubts that I could make a real difference.

"The most rewarding aspect of my job is seeing the positive impact sport can have on the lives of people who don't have a lot.

"As a sport we are really successful at engaging with white working class boys and girls but we haven't always been good at targeting people who look a bit different to everyone else.

"My role is to come up with new ways in which we can get these people into our community clubs and Academy programmes."

The fantastic rise in participation among women and girls over recent years offers hope for the RFL's ambitions: if gender barriers can be broken down, then race and ethnicity should not be blockages to wider participation.

Olivia's main geographic focus is the towns and cities along the M62 corridor – "once we get that right we can start looking at other areas across the country" – but she believes that

inclusion by its very definition should have no boundaries.

"There is a lot of work being done by our clubs and I give their staff support as and when they need it," she said. "I'm not the kind of person who's going to go steaming in teaching them how to suck eggs.

"There are so many people who know why inclusion is so important: we just have to go about including people in the right way to get the outcomes we want."

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION



The RFL's commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within the organisation and across the sport is outlined in Tackle It.

Tackle It is a sport-wide EDI action plan that was first published in October 2020. In 2023, coinciding with the midpoint of a five-year action plan, the Senior EDI Partner (then Inclusion Lead) led a review of Tackle It with the support of the Inclusion Board. Tackle It was refreshed to increase efficiency and more effectively drive positive change in rugby league, with actions refocused and refined in key areas to reflect progress made as well as work to be done.

The refreshed Tackle It Action Plan has been approved by the RFL Board, with responsibility shifted from a cross-departmental working group and peripheral stakeholders to the Executive and RL Commercial, enabling the sport to go further, faster. Notwithstanding the above, at the time of writing, the refreshed version of the action plan has yet to be published externally as it is undergoing independent review as part of the process linked to the Code for Sports Governance requirement for national governing bodies to have a Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP) that has been approved by Sport England and UK Sport. The intention is that Tackle It will be the RFL's DIAP.

Tackle It outlines three strategic commitments as part of the overarching goal to widen the reach and impact of Rugby League:

- Diversify Rugby League's talent pool and workforce;
- Improve the culture of Rugby League;
- Clarify processes, instil confidence in – and encourage – the reporting of discrimination, and ensure appropriate sanctions are in place – Rugby League has a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination and unacceptable behaviour.

The Inclusion Board was also refreshed in 2023 following a Board evaluation process that highlighted gaps in representation. An open recruitment process saw three members (Chris Gibbons, John Hughes and Michael Lawrence) reappointed and joined by new members (Debbie Bullock, James Child, Dan Clarke, Kelsey Gentles, Heather Robinson). The new board, chaired by Jamie Jones-Buchanan, brings fresh energy and enthusiasm, a deeper and wider level of engagement with the sport and broader lived experience and professional expertise to strengthen its ability to act as a critical friend to the RFL.

The Tackle It refresh added new ambitious targets around the diversity of the sport's match officials: the match official department is now tracking the diversity of Super League match official appointments as an indicator of the performance of the national talent development pathway. This approach underlines the achievements of match officials that has already seen the first Super League referee with a mixed ethnic background and the first female to referee a men's Betfred Challenge Cup match during the 2024 season.

Education remains a key EDI priority, alongside addressing incidents and patterns of concern. Disability abuse slurs and the homophobic f-slur were highlighted from 2023 incidents and addressed in professional game education in 2024, including ref cam footage of a player dismissal for homophobic language. There are multiple possible explanations for these increases, including greater awareness of the offensiveness of the terms and greater confidence that action will be taken. However, increased use in the game (and sport and society more broadly) will continue to be monitored. Bespoke training on challenging unacceptable language and behaviour has also been delivered at the annual safeguarding conference and internally to staff. Staff are currently undergoing an active bystander training programme, which is being considered for wider rollout across the sport.

The RFL continues to participate in the Sporting Equals Race Representation Index (RRI), which evaluates the ethnic diversity of sporting national governing bodies across five key areas – boards, executive leadership, coaching, athletes and officials – in an effort to tackle racial inequality and hold organisations to account on their diversity commitments. In 2023, the RFL was graded D. The RRI was added to Tackle It with a target of achieving grade C by 2025.

The 2023 season saw clubs designate home games as inclusion fixtures under the RL Together banner, supported by digital assets produced by RL Commercial. RL Together inclusion fixtures gives clubs the opportunity to showcase their EDI impact within their local communities and be a platform for expanding their connections and supporter base. Tackle It includes a target for 100 per cent of Super League clubs to deliver a dedicated fixture, which has yet to be reached. To assist in identifying potential themed matchdays and to support wider EDI planning, an EDI Calendar was produced for 2024 and has been shared with all clubs.

guidance and initiatives.

Rugby League collectively promoted the Level Playing Field Annual Fan Survey in 2023, yielding a hugely successful response – 7.4 per cent of the total response – and highlighting key areas where access and experience can be improved for disabled fans. In partnership with Community Integrated Care, an Easy Read Guide to the Challenge Cup finals was produced and the sensory rooms at Wembley Stadium were utilised to support fans with learning disabilities to understand, attend and enjoy this year's finals.

The sport's relationship with the Speaker of the House of Commons and current RFL President, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, continues to provide occasions to recognise and celebrate the achievements of those from diverse and under-represented groups. Rugby League has been well represented at events to mark South Asian Heritage Month, Black History Month, Disability History Month, LGBT History Month and Women's History Month.

A new reporting discrimination online form has been introduced to encourage detailed reporting, which in turn will lead to better outcomes when incidents do occur (Reporting Discrimination (rugby-league.com)). The form enables provides three ways to report an incident:

Tell the RFL about a specific incident so it can be investigated and potentially charged;

- Anonymously make the RFL aware of something;
- Inform the RFL of a concern with a view to discuss it and establish next steps.

Tackle It now outlines an action to reinvest misconduct fines back into the game via preventative and restorative action. Fines for unacceptable language and behaviour have been used by clubs to undertake work at club foundations to address issues. In the Community Game, the RFL is delivering Tackle It workshops to educate individuals and clubs alleged and charged with using unacceptable language and behaviour. To support the Operational Rules Tribunal function, new members were recruited in 2023 to improve decision making on unacceptable language and behaviour cases.

As always, the RFL welcomes collaboration with clubs to achieve progress in EDI in Rugby League, and invites clubs, club EDI leads and club staff with responsibility for EDI to share their priorities, good practice and identified needs. Uptake in support mechanisms has, at times, been lower than anticipated and feedback is valued in the design of future

PLAYER WELLBEING



Brain health in current and retired players became a strong focus for Rugby League Cares in 2023, when the charity established the sport's first Brain Health Fund.

The aim of the fund is to equip players and their families with the knowledge they need to sustain good brain health during- and post-career, and to provide important support for those who have been diagnosed with neurological conditions, both pre- and post-retirement.

The fund is managed by the RL Cares Brain Health Committee comprising RL Cares Director of Wellbeing Steve McCormack, the RFL Chief Medical Officer, RFL Deputy Medical Officer, RFL Director of Operations, RL Cares Transition Manager Francis Stephenson, Super League CEO, Super League women's representative and an independent chair.

The Brain Health Fund was officially launched in the autumn of 2023 at a gala dinner at Headingley Stadium fronted by RL Cares trustee Kevin Sinfield CBE and featuring key figures from the sport, including Rob Burrow CBE, Ellery Hanley and many of Kevin's former Leeds team-mates.

RL Cares Wellbeing Manager Bob Beswick and Community and Welfare Manager Keith Senior delivered brain health education to all Super League clubs in 2023 alongside Dr Gemma Phillips. This education was combined with the RFL medical department recommendations.

2023 saw former players Paul Wood and Bob Beswick have increased responsibilities with the wellbeing and welfare delivery. Ex-Leeds, Wakefield, Castleford and Doncaster hooker Colin Maskill was a valuable addition to the RL Cares staff, providing extra support to the game's past player network.

The charity continued to employ a full-time psychotherapist in Dave Kirk, along with extra confidential therapeutic and residential services as and when required

Regular discussions with statutory services, the RFL's Chief Medical Officer and other mental health specialists ensured that best practice was always deployed. RL Cares ensures the wellbeing provision is always backed up by academic research and the latest trends, provision and measurements are used, enabling the charity to create valid data to track the provision provided. RL Cares provides the RFL and club CEOs with detailed welfare reports every quarter. This provides an accurate summary

of whole game provision along with individual club's compliance with the RFL welfare policy.

A major focus of the charity was to continue to work with players to facilitate a dual-career approach as part of their personal development plans. As well as enabling players to gain an academic qualification, this improves their health and psychological wellbeing. It gives them a different focus or a positive distraction to the pressures of being professional sports people. Enhancing current skills, developing life skills and becoming more well-rounded athletes who flourish both on and off the field continues to be a focus point. Through the charity's wellbeing programme, and with support from clubs, players now have a chance to expand their networks beyond sport, enhance their employment prospects for the future and prevent possible identity crisis during any transition in their playing career.

UCEN, a branch of Manchester College, and RL Cares delivered a high number of continuous professional development opportunities to all club Player Welfare Managers, Heads of Youth and senior management. Subjects included leadership and management, dealing with crisis, whole-person wellbeing, sleep hygiene, financial wellbeing and spirituality.

UCEN Manchester, the higher education branch of Manchester College, and RL Cares carried out an extensive audit process with every men's Super League club. This comprehensive review of each club's provision and compliance with the RFL welfare policy gave a more accurate report and enabled every club to understand current provision standings and improvements required. The audit established two key areas: the first was to ensure all clubs are compliant with the RFL welfare policy; and the second was to establish if the clubs had a 'gold standard' provision. Gold standard provision was set out by liaising and researching wellbeing practice with other sports and the latest academic research.

Through the 2023 welfare audit, it was identified that some clubs still weren't compliant with the RFL welfare policy. As a priority, and with the relationship with UCEN, RL Cares facilitated a bespoke Level 3 (BASP) Counselling Skills course, to enable, for the first time, every club to be fully compliant with the policy.

Rugby League is now seen as a benchmark for other sports with regards to clubs and player welfare managers having minimum standard counselling skill qualifications. Through our relationship with UCEN, 2024/25 will see the

charity facilitate and develop a new Level 4/5 foundation degree in Elite Athlete Wellbeing. This will be a game-changing course with regards to minimum standards and will again see us at the forefront of looking after our players' wellbeing.

At the end of the third quarter of 2023, all clubs finished the year compliant and two clubs, St Helens and Wakefield Trinity, gaining the gold standard score on the audit. RL Cares are confident that all clubs will again be compliant in 2024. With support from the charity and some outstanding initiatives and buy in from the clubs, we are confident that more of our clubs will be gold standard.

RUGBY LEAGUE CHARITIES



2023 marked the final year of the agreement between the governing body and the sport's charities, Rugby League Cares and the Rugby League Benevolent Fund.

The role of RL Cares, particularly in relation to the provision of player wellbeing and welfare and community health, needed careful consideration in the structure of a new agreement that would commence in 2024.

The governance, structure and performance of the sport's player wellbeing and welfare programmes was analysed in detail, with the introduction of new measuring tools, including annual club audits. These take place in three stages: an initial audit is followed by self-assessment before a final audit towards the end of the year. Audit results are consequential in that they influence salary caps levels and central funding distributions for compliance and non-compliance.

This proved to be an important step forward for the sport and has resulted in new levels of consistency in the provision of support for players.

RL Cares recognised the concerns players faced around the continuing developments and discussions in relations to concussion and brain health. The high-profile nature of the topic has created anxiety amongst current and former players.

This was highlighted by the case of Mick Cook, a former Sheffield Eagles player and Leeds Rhinos coach who has been diagnosed with life-changing neuro-degenerative disease. Our experience working alongside Mick and his partner prompted the charity to consider what more can be done for players and their families suffering similar challenges. From this, a new Brain Health Fund programme was launched, focusing on fundraising and careful consideration of the types of support the charity could provide. This was an important theme for the charity in the latter part of 2023.

Strategically, the focus of RL Cares remained the same: to increase the funds and resources available to allow the charity to fulfil its role with players and the sport's communities. Income levels were increased in 2023, and a record amount of funding was invested in player wellbeing and welfare.

Throughout the last five years the sport has made remarkable progress in the delivery of wellbeing and welfare for people across all sectors of the sport and its communities. RL Cares, working alongside the RFL and member

clubs, has played a central role in leadership and management of these key developments. The charity has also been able to fund new activities and services that have kept up with the growth of the women's and wheelchair competitions.

The most significant and positive change has been a shift in the way services are provided to players, a move away from a model of delivery that supported people when they presented with a problem or crisis to a whole-person approach that enables players to adopt positive changes within their own lives and be more successful on and off the pitch.

Another major change was the move to bring therapeutic services into the charity. The sport had previously contracted with Sporting Chance for its high-level counselling services. Moving those services in-house and adopting a multi-disciplinary team approach to providing care to individuals struggling with their mental health and wellbeing has proven to be more effective and is delivering better outcomes for the player and the sport. This support is completely confidential and focused on providing the care people require, leaving them equipped to successfully manage their lives.

Through its own fundraising activities, the charity has invested in new roles and resources that are also delivering better outcomes for the sport's wellbeing programme. This includes the appointment of a dedicated Transition Manager, a Wellbeing Curriculum and Programme Manager, in-house counselling and therapeutic services, mentors and wellbeing and welfare officers.

RL Cares also provides wellbeing support to players involved in the England Performance Unit and England Community Lions: the charity's officers are now embedded within the England men, women, wheelchair and community squads and are regarded as valued and important members of the international programmes.

The availability of education and training grants has been significantly improved. The offer now includes the option to apply for a contribution towards university degree qualifications. These were previously unavailable.

The successful development of the charity's relationship and partnership with clubs has been a particular highlight of the last five years. Every full-time club is now compliant with the sport's wellbeing and welfare policy. Player Welfare Managers are fully qualified with all possessing a Level 3 Counselling qualification.

This step has equipped Player Welfare Managers to build effective and positive relationships with players and their families. Working together with the clubs and the sport there is now an ongoing commitment to continuous professional development for all wellbeing and welfare facing staff.

The charity recognises the commitments made by clubs, the RFL and Rugby League Commercial and is grateful of their ongoing commitment and support.

RL Cares also celebrated another fantastic year of supporting communities within our towns and cities in 2023.

We continually strive to care for the people who live, work and play in the villages, towns and cities wherever Rugby League is played. This includes all the men, women and children whose lives are touched by the power of sport.

Funded by Movember, we continued to scale and grow the life-affirming Ahead of the Game programme. RL Cares managed the growth of the programme throughout 2023, resulting in mental health and resilience education to over 15,000 young athletes, their parents and their coaches. We trained, funded and supported four community sports foundations to deliver the programme, focusing on areas where mental health needs are greatest. Funding from Movember will enable a further eight community foundations to come onboard to deliver the programme in 2024/25.

Our Rugby League Cares for the NHS programme continued to make a huge difference to the lives of NHS employees across Cheshire, Merseyside and the North-West. In 2023 Paul Wood and our dynamic team of former professional rugby league professionals delivered support for over 5,000 NHS frontline workers. Our programme delivers positive behaviour change within areas such as stress and coping, positive relationships, sleep and building resilience.

RL Cares also delivered its acclaimed Offload mental fitness programme to many other professions; focusing on those big employers within Rugby League communities where mental health challenges are high. In 2023 we continued to focus on the construction industry, providing intense interventions to over 800 construction workers across firms such as Kier, Murphys, Drax, Morgan Sindall and SSE. Other support to large employers includes work with Howorth Air Tech, City Fibre, and YMCA.

The charity also supports increasing numbers of Rugby League supporters as our Offload programmes continue to be funded and run in partnership with Warrington Wolves, Leeds Rhinos, Featherstone Rovers, Calderdale Community Trust and Sheffield Eagles. The programme will grow further in 2024/25.

We have also begun to support Rugby League people working within social care through a meaningful partnership with Aspire CBS. We are piloting the roll out of tailored mental fitness sessions alongside one-to-one wellbeing mentoring with a varied cohort of social care staff. Core to all of our work to support our communities is genuine partnerships. These partnerships enable the charity to grow our work and support more and more people each year.

GOVERNANCE CODE



Overview

The RFL has continued to seek to ensure that the principles of good governance are embedded in all aspects of its work.

A detailed Governance Statement reporting on the RFL's governance arrangements and performance during 2023 is published on the RFL website.

The key governance changes and matters for the RFL during 2023 were:

- RL Commercial Ltd became operational, ensuring it could exploit the sport's commercial rights. Its Board met on four occasions throughout the year.
- Tony Sutton was appointed the permanent Chief Executive Officer of the RFL in March 2023. He also became an Executive Director. Robert Hicks was appointed Company Secretary of the RFL and RL Commercial from January 2023.
- Jamie Jones-Buchanan was appointed a Board Observer in April 2023.
- Sir Lindsay Hoyle was re-appointed as RFL President for 2024.
- Trevor Hunt was appointed as Vice-President from December 2023 to the Council meeting in December 2024.
- Dr Rimla Akhtar was re-elected as a Non-Executive Director for the period to the Council meeting in summer 2025 but ceased this role on 31 December 2023.
- Simon Johnson was re-appointed the Chair for the period up to the Council meeting in summer 2026.

A number of governance projects were implemented across the sport, including projects relating to club board diversity and environmental sustainability.

Board and meetings

The Non-Executive Directors of the RFL during 2023 were Simon Johnson (Chair), Sandy Lindsay (Senior Independent Director), Dr Rimla Akhtar (resigned December 2023) and Cherrie Daley, and the Executive Director was Tony Sutton. The Company Secretary was Robert Hicks. The Board also has two observers, Ed Mallaburn and Jamie Jones-Buchanan.

During 2023 there were six formal Board meetings. There was 100 per cent attendance at these meetings by all directors. In addition, a significant number of Board meetings were held virtually, and further decisions made in writing. The number reflected the realignment of the sport's governance with the creation of

RL Commercial and the decision to bring on board the internationally renowned sport and entertainment agency IMG.

The sub-committees of the Board (Audit and Risk; Remuneration Committee; Nominations Committee; the Laws Committee; the Whole Game Board, Community Board, Inclusion Board and Clinical Advisory Group) met as required throughout the year.

In March 2023, the RFL Board formed a Brain Health sub-committee.

Its purpose is to specifically review the sport's response to concussive and sub-concussive impacts. Its members agreed to the following objectives:

- Reduce rates of concussion by 30 per cent over the next five years, where concussion rates are measurable.
- Reduce modifiable concussion risk factors, where concussion rates are not measurable.
- Reduce absolute sub-concussive exposure by 30 per cent over the next five years.

The Committee is chaired by the RFL Chief Executive Officer.

Members are drawn from across the sport including coaches, players, match officials, community game volunteers, medics, scientists, RL Cares, administrators and members of the Clinical Advisory Group and Audit and Risk Committee.

The committee made 44 recommendations to the RFL Board that were implemented from 1 January 2024.

Working with stakeholders

As outlined in its strategy, in seeking to achieve its objectives, the RFL works in partnership with all its stakeholders including Super League (Europe) Limited, RL Cares, the RFL Facilities Trust, professional clubs and community game leagues and clubs.

The RFL is the governing body for the whole sport – all clubs, all players and other participants.

The key activity that was completed in 2023 was the sport's decision to approve the Brain Health Sub-committee's 44 recommendations to make the game even safer and more accessible for all. In addition, Council approved the IMG recommendations relating to grading that will mean from 2025 the top 12 graded clubs will compete in the top tier of the men's discipline of the sport. A wider competition review

also took place for the women's game meaning a smaller Women's Super League underpinned by a competition pyramid for this discipline and a review of the men's competition below the Men's Super League.

Role of RFL

As the governing body of Rugby League, during 2023 the RFL governed, developed, promoted and grew the sport. This included:

- **GOVERNANCE:** Regulatory and operational matters concerning the entire sport including: the appointment of match officials, player registrations and the enforcement of the salary cap, facility standards, safeguarding, medical standards and on-field and off-field disciplinary matters.
- **PARTICIPATION:** Working with foundations and other partners, developing and growing grassroots Rugby League in clubs and educational settings. Inclusive playing offers ranged from primary school age opportunities to youth, open age, touch, tag, disability RL (physical disability and learning disability), Masters and Wheelchair RL.
- **PROFESSIONAL COMPETITIONS:** The operation of the Challenge Cup, the 1895 Cup, the Championship, League 1 and Men's and Women's Super League. The RFL provided several core services to RL Commercial in relation to the operation of the professional pyramid as set out within the realignment agreements.
- **REPRESENTATIVE TEAMS:** The operation of the England Performance Unit made up of the England Men's Senior, Knights, Women's Senior, Wheelchair, Academy and Youth teams.

FINANCIAL REVIEW & ACCOUNTS



Business review and results

The consolidated accounts for the RFL show a loss before tax for the financial year of £53k for the year ended 31 December 2023 (2022 loss: £946k). The RFL has maintained an aggregate positive cash balance throughout the year.

At 31 December 2023, this aggregate balance was £5,911k (2022: £7,879k).

Principal risks and uncertainties

The Board and Executive team had budgeted to make a profit in 2023 of £32k in order to continue the financial turnaround from the previous four years and to build reserves for future to bolster the Group's ability to absorb potential budget shocks in the coming years. The consolidated reported Group loss was £53k which predominantly relates to write-offs and unplanned costs of wrapping up of the Rugby League World Cup 2021 which was held in autumn 2022.

Detailed analysis of trading

It is important to note that these statements are consolidated and incorporate the results of Rugby League World Cup 2021 Limited and RFL Investments 2020 Limited, both wholly-owned subsidiaries of RFL (Governing Body) Limited. The reader should consider this when reviewing year-on-year results in all areas. The postponed RLWC2021 took place in 2022 and there have been some unforeseen costs incurred in 2023 which were not accounted for in 2022. RFL Investments 2020 Limited is the vehicle for the administration of the Sport Survival Fund and its Balance Sheet reflects the long-term liability in relation to the loans made to eligible entities in 2020, 2021 and 2022.

The accounts of both these subsidiaries are reported in full and filed at Companies House. Year-on-year turnover has decreased to £15,035k from £42,152k in 2022, which can be attributed mainly to the impact of RLWC2021. The RFL's revenue streams are also lower due to the assignment of its commercial and broadcast rights to RL Commercial Limited.

The vast majority of the RFL's Broadcast income, match income and sponsorship income is now generated by RL Commercial so by comparison these revenue streams are much lower than 2022.

Government funding from Sport England has reduced from £11,030k in 2022 to £4,819k in 2023. Again, this reflects the increased level of grant funding in 2022 relating to RLWC2021

Limited. The underlying grant income into the RFL has remained consistent in line with the award from Sport England.

The residual value share from RL Commercial was £8,439k in its first year of trading, which was in line with expectations.

Within the RFL accounts, the cost of sales heading is broken down into two sections. The first being the external, third-party costs of making the sale and the second being the cost of sales that are internal to the RFL's stakeholders such as payments directly made to clubs. External cost of sales reduced from £32,206k in 2022 to £4,344k in 2023. This reduction is attributable to the reduction in match costs and event staging costs relating to RLWC2021 which were clearly higher in the year of the tournament.

Grant-funded activities expenditure has returned to normal levels at £3,208k in 2023 from £4,842k in 2022, reflecting the level of programme activity delivered in 2022, and its associated income.

Payments to and on behalf of clubs is made up of the cost of sales element of £0k (2022: £274k) and a further amount of £5,885k (2022: £5,004k) shown below Gross Profit on the Group statement of comprehensive income, which in 2023 brought the total payable to and on behalf of clubs to £5,885k (2022: £5,278k). This relates in the main to the increase in insurance costs and match officials' costs year-on-year. It is important to note that in 2023, the sport's player welfare provision was met by the RFL and RL Commercial through the operation of an agreement with Rugby League Cares.

In 2023, Operating Costs decreased to £5,043k from £15,283k in 2022. This is due to the classification of grant-funded expenditure in RLWC2021 Limited as operating costs as the tournament took place during 2022. Group Staff Costs have significantly decreased from £7,661k in 2022 to £4,774k in 2023. This is due to the impact of RLWC2021 staffing costs in 2022. There were some residual staffing costs relating to RLWC2021 up to the end of March 2023. Directors' remuneration was reduced from £686k in 2022 to £287k in 2023. It should be noted that in 2022, this total included a provision of £245k for the compensation for loss of office for the former Chief Executive Officer and Chief Regulatory Officer. Costs of the Non-Executive Board have decreased slightly due to reductions and timing of Non-Executive Directors movements in 2023, as well as the reduction in costs relating to the Board of RLWC2021 now that the tournament has concluded.

Interest receivable by the RFL in 2023 is made up of two elements. The first is the RFL Group's interest receivable on bank deposits (£190k) and the second is the interest receivable by RFL Investments 2020 Ltd on behalf of DCMS of £301k (which is subsequently paid over to DCMS). Total interest receivable was £492k (2022: £367k) owing predominantly to improved treasury management and favourable interest rates.

RFL (Governing Body) Limited

Group statement of comprehensive income For the year ended 31st December 2023

	Notes	2023 £	2022 £
Turnover	3	15,034,560	42,152,041
Cost of sales	4	(4,344,180)	(32,206,145)
Cost of sales payable to or on behalf of clubs	5	-	(273,750)
Total cost of sales		<u>(4,344,180)</u>	<u>(32,479,895)</u>
Gross profit		10,690,380	9,672,146
Payments to or on behalf of clubs and other member organisations	5	(5,884,537)	(5,004,132)
Operating costs		<u>(5,043,009)</u>	<u>(15,282,694)</u>
Total administrative costs		<u>(10,927,546)</u>	<u>(20,286,826)</u>
Other operating income		76,031	9,663,065
Operating loss	6	<u>(161,135)</u>	<u>(951,615)</u>
Interest receivable and similar income	10	491,555	367,003
Interest payable and similar expenses	11	<u>(383,574)</u>	<u>(396,855)</u>
Loss before taxation		<u>(53,154)</u>	<u>(981,467)</u>
Tax on loss	12	<u>(32)</u>	<u>35,788</u>
Loss and total comprehensive loss for the financial year		<u><u>(53,186)</u></u>	<u><u>(945,679)</u></u>

Loss for the financial year is all attributable to the members of the parent company.

Total comprehensive income for the year is all attributable to the members of the parent company.

RFL (Governing Body) Limited

Group statement of financial position

For the year ended 31st December 2023

	Notes	£	2023 £	£	2022 £
Fixed assets					
Tangible assets	13		595,440		663,610
Investment property	14		750,000		750,000
Investments	15		50		50
			<hr/>		<hr/>
			1,345,490		1,413,660
Current assets					
Debtors	16	21,387,322		29,938,353	
Cash at bank and in hand		5,910,702		7,879,387	
		<hr/>		<hr/>	
		27,298,024		37,817,740	
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	17	(7,386,750)		(17,588,338)	
		<hr/>		<hr/>	
Net current assets			19,911,274		20,229,402
			<hr/>		<hr/>
Total assets less current liabilities			21,256,764		21,643,062
Creditors: amounts falling due after more than one year	18		(21,287,377)		(21,620,489)
			<hr/>		<hr/>
Net (liabilities)/assets			(30,613)		22,573
			<hr/>		<hr/>
Capital and reserves					
Revaluation reserve	22		118,993		118,993
Profit and loss reserves	22		(149,606)		(96,420)
			<hr/>		<hr/>
Total equity			(30,613)		22,573
			<hr/>		<hr/>

RFL (Governing Body) Limited

Company statement of financial position For the year ended 31st December 2023

	Notes	£	2023 £	£	2022 £
Fixed assets					
Tangible assets	13		340,000		340,000
Investment property	14		750,000		750,000
Investments	15		389,911		389,911
			<u>1,479,911</u>		<u>1,479,911</u>
Current assets					
Debtors	16	1,645,145		1,841,905	
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	17	(6,700)		(50)	
		<u></u>	<u>1,638,445</u>	<u></u>	<u>1,841,855</u>
Net current assets					
Total assets less current liabilities			<u>3,118,356</u>		<u>3,321,766</u>
Provisions for liabilities					
Deferred tax liability	20	22,609		22,609	
		<u></u>	<u>(22,609)</u>	<u></u>	<u>(22,609)</u>
Net assets			<u>3,095,747</u>		<u>3,299,157</u>
Capital and reserves					
Revaluation reserve	22		118,993		118,993
Profit and loss reserves	22		2,976,754		3,180,164
Total equity			<u>3,095,747</u>		<u>3,299,157</u>

RFL (Governing Body) Limited

Group statement of changes in equity For the year ended 31st December 2023

	Share capital	Revaluation reserve	Profit and loss reserves	Total
	£	£	£	£
Balance at 1 January 2022	-	118,993	849,259	968,252
Year ended 31 December 2022:				
Loss and total comprehensive income	-	-	(945,679)	(945,679)
Balance at 31 December 2022	-	118,993	(96,420)	22,573
Year ended 31 December 2023:				
Loss and total comprehensive income	-	-	(53,186)	(53,186)
Balance at 31 December 2023	-	118,993	(149,606)	(30,613)

RFL (Governing Body) Limited

Company statement of changes in equity For the year ended 31st December 2023

	Share capital	Revaluation reserve	Profit and loss reserves	Total
	£	£	£	£
Balance at 1 January 2022	-	118,993	3,169,559	3,288,552
Year ended 31 December 2022:				
Profit and total comprehensive income for the year	-	-	10,605	10,605
Balance at 31 December 2022	-	118,993	3,180,164	3,299,157
Year ended 31 December 2023:				
Profit and total comprehensive income	-	-	(203,410)	(203,410)
Balance at 31 December 2023	-	118,993	2,976,754	3,095,747

RFL (Governing Body) Limited

Group statement of cash flows

For the year ended 31st December 2023

	Notes	£	2023 £	£	2022 £
Cash flows from operating activities					
Cash absorbed by operations	28		(1,513,430)		(7,908,967)
Net cash outflow from operating activities			<u>(1,513,430)</u>		<u>(7,908,967)</u>
Investing activities					
Purchase of tangible fixed assets		(30,067)		(300,098)	
Proceeds from disposal of tangible fixed assets		2,366		1,628	
Purchase of joint ventures		-		(50)	
Interest received		358,170		27,334	
Net cash generated from/(used in) investing activities			<u>330,469</u>		<u>(271,186)</u>
Financing activities					
Proceeds from borrowings		-		1,196,596	
Repayment of borrowings		(785,724)		(622,081)	
Net cash (used in)/generated from financing activities			<u>(785,724)</u>		<u>574,515</u>
Net decrease in cash and cash equivalents			<u>(1,968,685)</u>		<u>(7,605,638)</u>
Cash and cash equivalents at beginning of year			<u>7,879,387</u>		<u>15,485,025</u>
Cash and cash equivalents at end of year			<u>5,910,702</u>		<u>7,879,387</u>

PRESIDENT SIR LINDSAY HOYLE MP

Sir Lindsay Hoyle, the Speaker of the House of Commons and MP for Chorley, continued as the 32nd President of the Rugby Football League in 2023. Sir Lindsay succeeded Clare Balding CBE on December 22, 2022, after the popular television broadcaster and presenter had held the position from July 2020.

A lifelong Warrington supporter – his late father, Lord Doug Hoyle was the Cheshire club's Chair between 1999 and 2009 – Sir Lindsay also spent time as Chair of the now defunct Chorley Borough club in the 1980s.

On his appointment, Sir Lindsay said: "I have been a rugby league fan all my life – I think it's an absolutely fantastic sport – so it is a real honour to be asked to be RFL President. Since my father introduced me to the game, I have loved the fast pace, high collision nature of rugby league, but also its vital role in bringing communities together and developing upcoming talent."

He was the RFL's Chief Guest at the men's and women's Betfred Challenge Cup finals at Wembley Stadium in August 2023, following in the footsteps of one of his predecessors as Speaker, the late Baroness Boothroyd who was Chief Guest for the 1994 Challenge Cup final between Leeds and Wigan.

Sir Lindsay will remain as RFL President until December 31, 2024.



VICE-PRESIDENT SUE TAYLOR MBE

Sue Taylor also continued as RFL Vice-President throughout 2023, having succeeded Mike Smith in July 2022. Due in part to the Covid-enforced delay to RLWC2021, Sue's tenure was 18 months rather than the usual 12.

Sue hails from Huddersfield and has been a loyal servant to the community game throughout her adult life. She served as secretary of Underbank ARLFC and performed similar roles at St Joseph's and at Paddock before helping set up the Newsome Magpies club – now known as Newsome Panthers – in 1989.

Sue's dedication to the Huddersfield Amateur League saw her become treasurer and secretary, with the Pennine League also benefiting from her business acumen and experience. In 2013 Sue became the first female Chair of BARLA.

Sue stood down at the end of her tenure in December 2023 when she was succeeded by broadcaster and community game champion Trevor Hunt.



BOARD SIMON JOHNSON

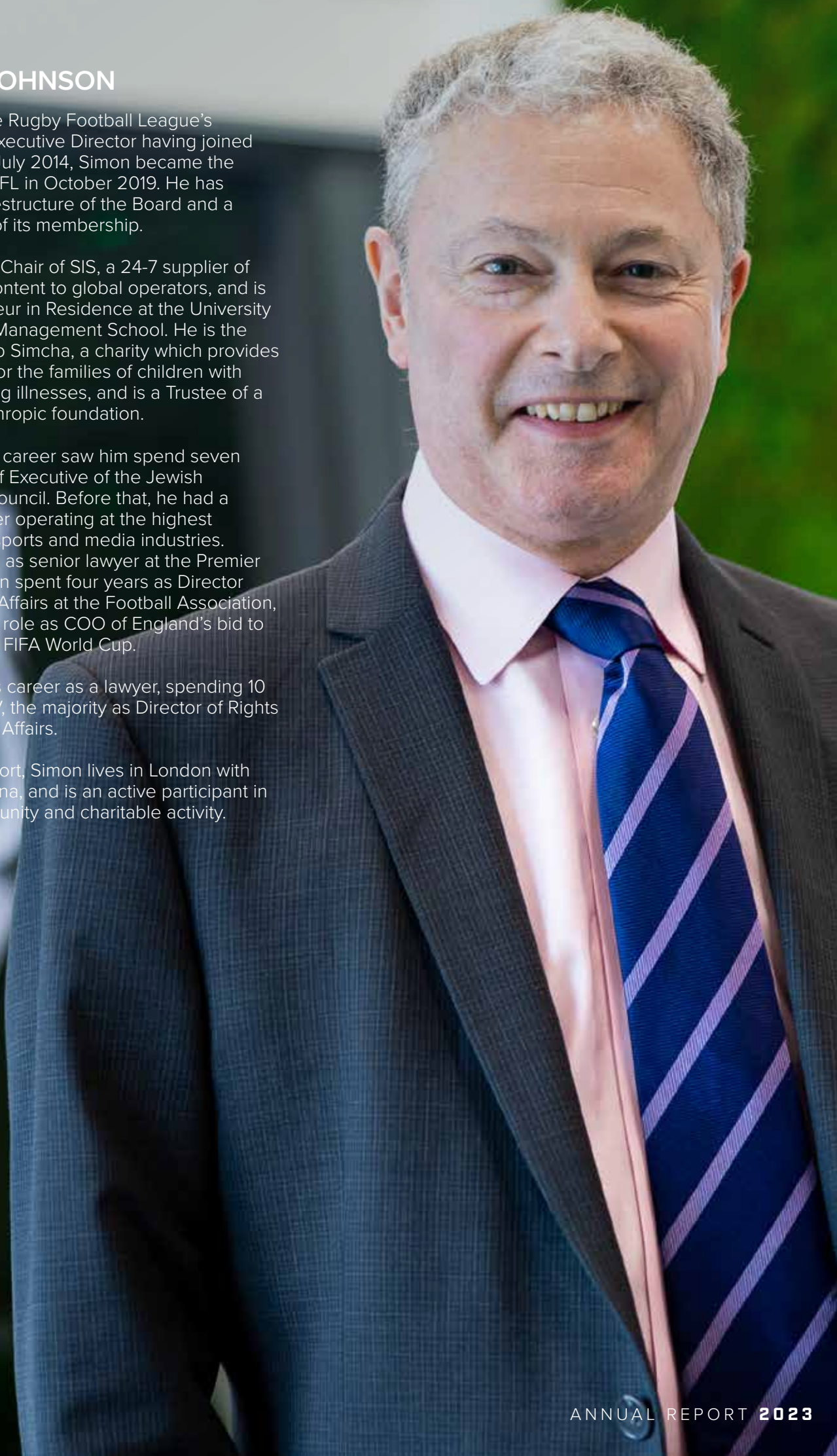
Previously the Rugby Football League's Senior Non-Executive Director having joined the Board in July 2014, Simon became the Chair of the RFL in October 2019. He has overseen a restructure of the Board and a refreshment of its membership.

Simon is also Chair of SIS, a 24-7 supplier of live betting content to global operators, and is an Entrepreneur in Residence at the University of Lancaster Management School. He is the Chair of Camp Simcha, a charity which provides respite care for the families of children with life-threatening illnesses, and is a Trustee of a family philanthropic foundation.

His Executive career saw him spend seven years as Chief Executive of the Jewish Leadership Council. Before that, he had a 20-year career operating at the highest levels of the sports and media industries. After a period as senior lawyer at the Premier League, Simon spent four years as Director of Corporate Affairs at the Football Association, followed by a role as COO of England's bid to host the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

He started his career as a lawyer, spending 10 years with ITV, the majority as Director of Rights and Business Affairs.

Away from sport, Simon lives in London with his wife, Joanna, and is an active participant in Jewish community and charitable activity.



BOARD DR RIMLA AKHTAR OBE

Dr Akhtar has over 18 years' experience in the sports industry across the UK, Middle East and Asia, after a successful career in the city at leading global professional services firm Pricewaterhouse Coopers.

In 2014, she became the first Muslim and Asian woman on the FA Council in addition to her role on the Inclusion Advisory Board at the FA, and in 2015 she was awarded an MBE for her contribution to equality and diversity in sport. She holds a portfolio of additional strategic and boardroom roles, including as an Independent Director of the Sports Ground Safety Authority, council member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland and independent director of Betty's and Taylors Group.

She was ranked 14th in the 2018 Forbes global list of the most powerful women in sport. She founded the leading global sport development consultancy, RimJhim Consulting; she was Chair of the Muslim Women's Sport Foundation until December 2018; and co-founded the global Muslim Women in Sport Network.

Dr Akhtar resigned from the Board on December 31 2023 for personal reasons, saying: "I am extremely proud of the work I have undertaken over the past four years for our sport, especially in the areas of audit and risk, and equity, diversity and inclusion. I believe that both of these are as have been set up strongly for success and I look forward to seeing rugby league and its communities flourish in the future as a result. I have appreciated the opportunity to serve the people of rugby league and wish the best for everyone involved with this special sport."



BOARD SANDY LINDSAY MBE

Sandy is Chair of Tangerine, the multi award-winning specialist creative communications agency she founded in Manchester in 2002 and which she put into employee ownership in 2017.

In 2015 she was awarded an MBE for services to business and young people, and in the same year was named North West Director of the Year by the Institute of Directors (and Highly Commended in the same awards nationally). That followed the launch in 2013 of The Juice Academy, the UK's first industry-led social media apprenticeship which has since created jobs for more than 600 young people in the North West and across the UK. Last year, she sold The Academy and, with the proceeds of the sale, created The Bright Futures fund with the charity, Forever Manchester. The fund will run for three years and donate £125,000 per year to community groups which support social mobility, a cause Sandy is especially passionate about.



BOARD DR CHERRIE DALEY

Dr Cherrie Daley is a Chartered Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society (AFBPsS), with almost two decades of experience in high performance sport. Having worked across a wide variety of elite sports settings in both practitioner and leadership roles, Cherrie has a strong appreciation for the challenges involved. Cherrie was a technical lead for the English Institute of Sport (EIS) supporting Olympic and Paralympic athletes, coaches, and practitioners during both the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympic/Paralympic cycles. From 2014 until 2022 Cherrie held several positions for City Football Group (CFG) serving latterly as a director, overseeing central performance support Services (including coaching, human performance, sports medicine and applied research) for 10 clubs across the world. Cherrie has made contributions to the fields of leadership, sport psychology, youth development and athlete well-being, and is currently engaged in consultancy projects and advisory roles across both sport and corporate contexts, specialising in strategic, organisation and leadership development. Cherrie was appointed the Welfare and Safety and Anti-Doping Lead for the Board in January 2023. In 2024 Cherrie successfully established the RFL's first Performance and Coaching sub-committee, recruiting a wide range of expertise from elite sport to support and develop these dimensions within the organisation, Cherrie acts as Chair and will work closely with the new Talent and Performance Director.



BOARD TONY SUTTON

Tony Sutton was appointed Chief Executive Officer following the departure of Ralph Rimmer in December 2022. Previously, Tony had been the RFL's Chief Operating Officer from January 2019, having joined the governing body as Director of Finance and Facilities in February 2017. His previous roles include Group Finance Director and Chief Operating Officer of Hull College Group, a large further education college group with sites across Yorkshire, and prior to that 13 years with Hull FC during a period in which the club moved from the Boulevard to the then newly-built KC Stadium, as well as make their first Super League Grand Final appearance in 2006, following a memorable Challenge Cup win in Cardiff in 2005.

Tony is also a director of Rugby League World Cup 2021 Ltd, a Trustee of the RFL Facilities Trust and Chair of Trustees at Fitmums & Friends, a charity that supports participation in running, walking, cycling and athletics across Yorkshire.



BOARD ROBERT HICKS

Robert Hicks was appointed Company Secretary in January 2023. He has worked in Rugby League within the Legal and Operations Department since February 2011, becoming the Director of Operations and Legal in October 2021. He has overall responsibility for the administration and regulatory framework across all sectors of the sport including player welfare, match officials and safeguarding. Robert is a former international match official having officiated at three World Cups. He refereed two Challenge Cup finals, two Super League Grand Finals, two World Club Challenges and numerous international matches, whilst officiating at more than 500 first team matches, including over 300 in Super League. A qualified lawyer, Robert was admitted to the Roll in February 2008 (having previously been called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn in July 2004). He previously worked in private practice before joining the RFL where he was responsible for the drafting of the sport's first set of Operational Rules for Tiers 4-6 as well as being the lead legal person on the 2013 World Cup. Robert has been actively involved in the sport for most of his life, including in several volunteer roles within the community game at Saddleworth Rangers and latterly at Batley Boys. He is also a Trustee of the Rodillian Multi Academy Trust where he is also a member of the Trust's Audit and Risk Committee.



A portrait of Ed Mallaburn, a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a light-colored blazer over a white shirt. He is looking slightly to the right. The background is blurred, showing some greenery and a dark screen.

BOARD ED MALLABURN

Ed Mallaburn is IMG Media's Head of Sport, and sits on both the RFL and RL Commercial Boards as part of IMG's 12-year strategic partnership with Rugby League.

BOARD

JAMIE JONES-BUCHANAN MBE

Jamie Jones-Buchanan sits on the RFL Board as a Board Observer, attending meetings, supporting discussions, and assisting in succession planning. He is also Chair of the RFL Inclusion Board. Jamie also currently holds the new position of Director of Culture, Diversity and Inclusivity at Betfred Super League club Leeds Rhinos. He enjoyed a glittering professional playing career as an integral member of the Rhinos' 'Golden Generation' which oversaw the club's most successful period between 2004 and 2017. Jamie played in seven Super League Grand Finals as well as lifting the League Leaders' Shield, Challenge Cup, and the World Club Challenge on numerous occasions. In 2022, he was appointed an MBE in the New Year's Honours for services to rugby league and the community of Leeds.

