

COMMUNITY RUGBY LEAGUE

MORE THAN A SPORT REVIEW

END-OF-YEAR 2025



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2025 has been a significant year for Community Rugby League, marked by growth across key participation areas, major governance reform, and an expanding social impact footprint. The sport has continued to demonstrate that Rugby League is more than a sport; it is a community, a development pathway, and a force for positive change.

Key Progress in 2025

- **Participation Growth:** Total participation increased by 2.9% compared with 2024, continuing the sport's steady recovery, post Covid, across Primary, Junior, Youth, Education, Inclusion, and Social Rugby League.
- **Youth & Junior Strength:** All under-18 age groups grew, with particularly strong gains in Primary girls (+16.5%) and Youth boys (+6.6%).
- **Inclusive Rugby League Expansion:** Disability variants grew by 10.9%, with record engagement in Wheelchair RL (+12.9%) and Learning Disability RL (+13.7%).
- **Women & Girls Development:** Growth across Girls Leagues, expansion of Futures and RugBees, and strengthened competitive opportunities across Women's tiers.
- **Education Sector Growth:** School participation increased by 6%, the new Champion Schools format was delivered successfully, and Women's 9s was confirmed as a BUCS competition for 2026.
- **Social Rugby League:** Touch (+17%) and Masters (+3%) continued to expand, with Women's Masters experiencing another breakthrough year.
- **England Community Lions:** Over 900 nominations and 125 players representing their country across U16, U18, Universities, and Women's programmes.
- **Social Impact:** The RFL Community Trust was formally registered, Community Wellbeing Hubs expanded, and major programmes continued to deliver meaningful outcomes.
- **Volunteer Growth:** Volunteer participation increased by 3.5%, with over 6,200 active volunteers supporting the community game.
- **NCRL Governance Reform:** The most significant structural change in decades was completed, aligning all community competitions under a single, modern governance framework ahead of full implementation in 2026.

Challenges and Opportunities

- **Open Age Decline:** Participation fell by 4.3%, continuing a long-term downward trend. This reinforces the need for the NCRL competition restructure to create a more sustainable, balanced, and development-appropriate Open Age environment.
- **Regional Disparities:** Some areas continue to experience reduced activity or limited competition offers.
- **College Participation Drop:** College numbers fell by 18.7%, requiring review of format, support, and pathways.
- **Behaviour and Discipline:** Growth in Girls and Women's competitions has brought increased behavioural challenges.
- **Volunteer Capacity:** Particularly in the South, where targeted support is being deployed.

Vision for 2026 and Beyond

- Full implementation of the NCRL governance model and competition rules
- Launch of the new competition pyramid, addressing Open Age sustainability
- Continued expansion of inclusive and flexible playing offers
- Strengthened behaviour, welfare, and brain health measures
- Growth of Community Wellbeing Hubs and social impact programmes
- Enhanced support for volunteers and clubs
- Continued investment in women and girls’ pathways
- A renewed focus on regional balance and long-term sustainability

2025 has demonstrated that Rugby League’s strength lies not only in participation numbers, but in the people, communities, and values that underpin the sport. As we move into 2026, the commitment to being more than a sport remains central to everything we do.



**NATIONAL
COMMUNITY
RUGBY LEAGUE**

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Community Rugby League More Than a Sport End-of-Year Update for 2025. This report summarises the work delivered across the year by the RFL Development Team, our Foundations, volunteers, clubs, and partners. It reflects the continued progress being made towards the Community Strategy & Vision 2022–2030.

2025 has been a year defined by growth, modernisation, and a renewed focus on the values that make Rugby League unique. Across every strand of the community game, participation, governance, education, inclusion, social impact, and representative pathways, the sport has continued to evolve in ways that strengthen its identity and deepen its connection to the people and communities it serves.

The Community Strategy & Vision remains centred on three core priorities:

- Supporting our core community game participants and clubs
- Growing our education offers
- Having a positive social impact

This year's progress demonstrates how these priorities work together to ensure Rugby League remains more than a sport: a place where people belong, develop, and thrive.

2025 has seen continued growth across Primary, Junior, Youth, Education, Inclusion, and Social Rugby League, alongside major structural reform through the establishment of the National Community Rugby League (NCRL). These developments strengthen the foundations of the sport, improve consistency and clarity for clubs and volunteers, and ensure safer, more positive environments for players.

ACTIVE PARTICIPANT UPDATES

As is usual, we report to Sport England twice a year on the number of active participants. Reporting takes place at the end of August (mid-year) and in December (end-of-year). The mid-year report focuses on participants in core community club settings, while the end-of-year report provides a more comprehensive picture, including social and educational activity.

Activities in educational settings, such as schools, colleges, and universities, follow the academic year. The number of active participants reported at the end of 2025, therefore, reflects activity delivered from the beginning of the autumn term in 2024 through to the end of the summer term in 2025.

CORE COMMUNITY BREAKDOWN



Total participation increased by 2.9% compared with 2024, continuing the sport’s steady recovery and expansion across key age groups and formats following the post-COVID period.

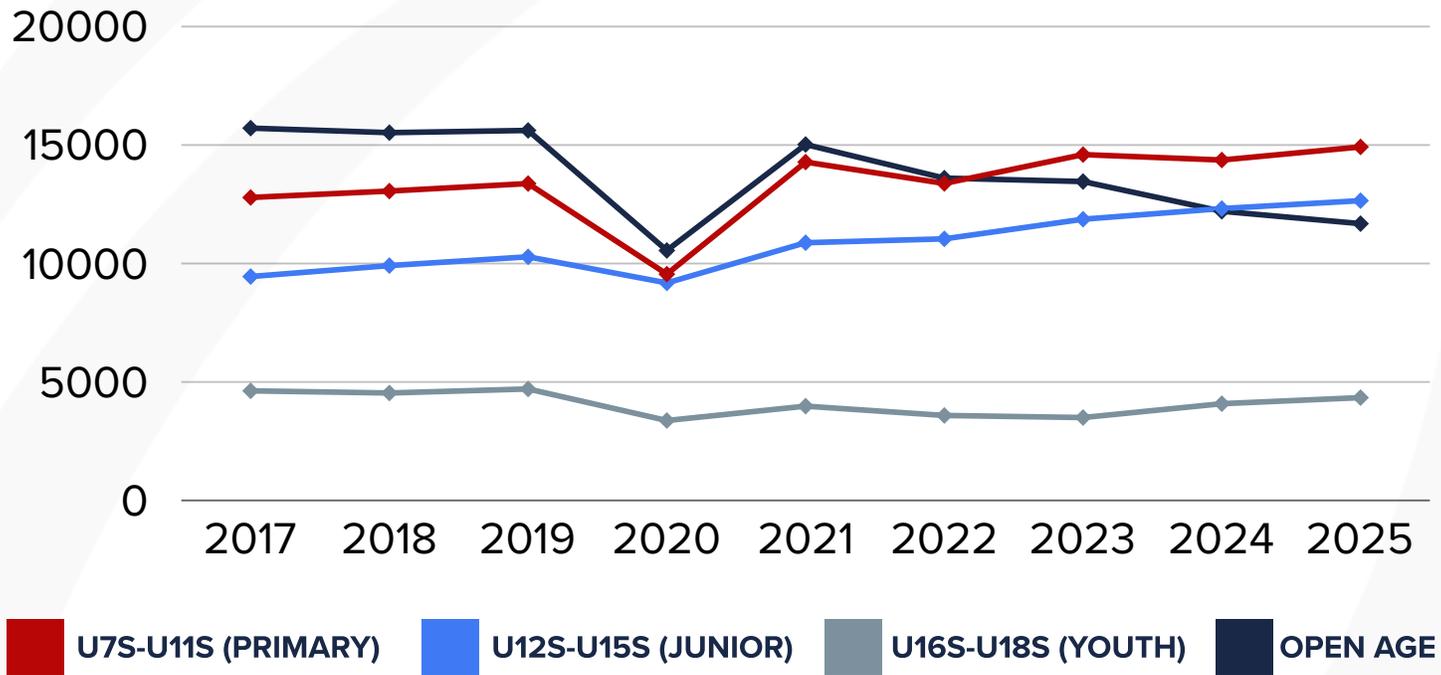
- **2017 baseline:** 95,000
- **2024 total:** 97,958
- **2025 total:** 100,821

This growth reflects continued expansion across Primary, Junior, Youth, Education, Inclusion, and Social Rugby League.

We have recorded over 100,000 active participants, for the first time, since the COVID pandemic.

ACTIVE PARTICIPANT UPDATES

Total community club-based players by age group



The graph above illustrates the trends in active participant groups by age since 2017. While participants in our Primary, Junior, and Youth age groups show a consistent positive trend, the open age category presents an outlier, experiencing a steady decline. This trend is concerning, as although we observed some growth between 2018 and 2019, the data suggests further decline in numbers without intervention.

The sustained decline in Open Age participation is one of the clearest indicators of why structural reform has been necessary. The introduction of the National Community Rugby League (NCRL) provides the sport with a modern, nationally consistent competition framework designed to address the issues that have contributed to falling adult participation. While the transition has required additional work during 2025, the new structure will ultimately create more balanced leagues, reduce mismatches over longer term, improve behaviour, and support a more sustainable Open Age environment. The 2025 data reinforces the importance of this reform and demonstrates the need for a competition model that better reflects the realities of today’s community game.

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

CORE COMMUNITY BREAKDOWN

| AGE GROUPS | BASELINE | 2024 | 2025 | END-YEAR 2024 TO 2025 DIFFERENCE |
|----------------------------|----------|-------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
| | | END OF YEAR | END OF YEAR | |
| U7 TO U11 (PRIMARY) | 12,000 | 14,368 | 14,912 | 3.8% |
| BOYS | | 12,233 | 12,434 | 1.6% |
| GIRLS | | 2,135 | 2,487 | 16.5% |
| U12 TO U15 (JUNIOR) | 9,400 | 12,319 | 12,652 | 2.7% |
| BOYS | | 9,717 | 9,917 | 2.1% |
| GIRLS | | 2,602 | 2,735 | 5.1% |
| U16 TO U18 (YOUTH) | 4,800 | 4,082 | 4,339 | 6.3% |
| BOYS | | 3,445 | 3,671 | 6.6% |
| GIRLS | | 637 | 668 | 4.9% |
| OPEN AGE | 18,099 | 12,205 | 11,682 | -4.3% |
| MEN | | 10,387 | 10,012 | -3.6% |
| WOMEN | | 1,818 | 1,670* | -8.1% |
| TOTAL (MALE) | | 35,782 | 1,670 | 0.7% |
| TOTAL (FEMALE) | | 7,192 | 7,560 | 5.1% |
| TOTAL | | 42,974 | 43,594 | 1.4% |

*The difference is due to the primary registration of Women's Super League (WSL) players now sitting within the professional game data.

BREAKDOWN

2025 recorded the highest participation levels across the Primary and Junior age groups, with notable increases among female players, particularly within the Primary category.

- Primary RL experienced overall expansion of 3.8% from 2024, with participation rising from 14,368 to 14,921. Growth is visible across both genders:
 - Boys saw a modest uplift of 1.6%, climbing from 12,233 to 12,434.
 - Primary girls registered the most substantial jump across all age groups, increasing by 16.5%, with numbers moving from 2,135 in 2024 to 2,487 in 2025.
- Junior numbers increased by 2.7% compared with 2024, growing from 12,319 to 12,652 participants. Both genders contributed to the overall rise, with girls making a particularly strong contribution:
 - Boys saw a slight improvement of 2.1%, moving from 9,717 to 9,917 in 2025.
 - Girls built on the momentum of 2024, adding a further 5.1% in 2025, with participation increasing from 2,602 to 2,735.
- The Youth category showed the most pronounced uplift, increasing by 6.3% from 4,082 to 4,339.
 - Youth boys advanced by 6.6%, rising from 3,445 to 3,671 in 2025, reflecting improved retention in youth rugby league following the change in the age when a player can play open age rugby league.
 - Girls also showed ongoing improvement, increasing by 4.9%, with participation moving from 637 to 668.
- Slight Decline in Open Age Participation, Especially Among Men:
 - Contrary to the positive patterns in younger groups, open-age participation declined by -4.3%, decreasing from 12,205 in 2024 to 11,682 in 2025.
 - Men experienced a drop in registrations, falling from 10,387 to 10,012, representing a -3.6% reduction.
 - Whilst the data suggests a decrease in women's participation, in reality this is a consequence of the primary registration of Women's Super League (WSL) players now sitting within WSL clubs. With those players' registrations now forming part of the professional game dataset, they no longer appear within the core community figures. These participants still feature in the overall number of active players, but as of 2025 are not counted within community totals. Had the registrations of those players remained within the core community setting, Women's participation would have shown an increase of 5.5%.

Women's Playing Offers

| AGE GROUPS | FEMALE |
|------------------|--------------|
| U7-U11 (PRIMARY) | 2,487 |
| U12-U15 (JUNIOR) | 2,735 |
| U16-U18 (YOUTH) | 668 |
| OPEN AGE | 1,670 |
| TOTAL | 7,560 |

The 2025 target for female players in the core community game was 9,000, based on a 2023 baseline of 5,065. By the end of 2025, 7,560 players were recorded, rising to 8,027 if Women's Super League (WSL) players were included. This means the target was not fully achieved; however, the sport delivered significant growth, reaching 89% of the target and increasing female participation by more than 3,000 players compared with the 2023 baseline.

Inclusive Playing Offers

Inclusion experienced notable expansion in 2025, rising by 11.1% from 2024. All strands contributed to this upswing, with the strongest increases seen in Learning Disability RL (+13.7%) and Wheelchair RL (+12.9%). Physical Disability RL maintained steady forward movement, growing by 2.2%.

| CORE INDICATORS | END OF YEAR 2023 | END OF YEAR 2024 | END OF YEAR 2025 | 2024 V 2025 |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|--------------|
| PDRL | 263 | 223 | 230 | 3.1% |
| LDRL | 388 | 343 | 390 | 13.7% |
| WHEELCHAIR | 467 | 504 | 569 | 12.9% |
| TOTAL | 1,118 | 1,070 | 1,189 | 11.1% |



Education and Social Offers

Education continued its upward trajectory, achieving a 4.2% uplift from 2024. Both Schools and Universities supported this rise, increasing by 4.6% and 7.7% respectively. College participation declined, dropping from 763 to 620, a decrease of 18.7%.

| CORE INDICATORS | 2024 | 2025 |
|-----------------|---------------|---------------|
| SCHOOLS | 35,155 | 36,781 |
| COLLEGES | 763 | 620 |
| UNIVERSITIES | 1,150 | 1,239 |
| TOTAL | 37,068 | 38,640 |

Social Rugby League showed further progress, climbing from 14,607 to 14,792 in 2025. This improvement stems largely from sustained growth in both Masters and Touch activity.

- Touch again demonstrated strong expansion, rising by 17%, highlighting strong engagement.
- Masters participation kept moving upward, increasing by 3% in 2025.
- Try Tag experienced a slight dip but remains consistent relative to historical levels.
- Collectively, these results reflect solid advancement across all areas of the social pathway.

| CORE INDICATORS | 2024 | 2025 |
|-----------------|---------------|---------------|
| TOUCH | 1,232 | 1,447 |
| TTR | 11,004 | 10,980 |
| MASTERS | 2,100 | 2,164 |
| X-LEAGUE | 137 | 70 |
| WALKING | 134 | 131 |
| TOTAL | 14,607 | 14,792 |

PLAYER SAFETY UPDATE

Player safety remains a central priority for the sport, and 2025 has seen continued progress in implementing the recommendations of the Brain Health Committee. The focus this year has been on embedding safer practices, reducing over-competitive competition framework, and supporting coaches, players, and volunteers to understand and adopt behaviours that reduce risk. This work is fundamental to ensuring Rugby League remains a safe, sustainable, and development-focused sport for all ages.

Key Areas of Focus

- **Protecting Players:** Ensuring all participants experience safe, age-appropriate playing environments supported by clear guidance and consistent implementation.
- **Protecting the Sport:** Reducing concussion and sub-concussive exposure, mitigating insurance pressures, and proactively adapting to emerging evidence.
- **Supporting Coaches and Volunteers:** Providing education, resources, and clarity to help deliver safer training and matchday environments.

Strategic Objectives

The sport continues to work towards the long-term objectives set out by the Brain Health Committee:

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

Progress in 2025

A further phase of policy implementation has taken place this year, building on the 44 policy changes introduced in 2024. Key developments include:

- **Tackle Height Modifications:** Continued refinement of tackle height guidance across age groups, supporting safer contact and reducing head-on-head collisions.
- **Sanctioning and Behaviour:** Strengthened sanctioning frameworks to discourage behaviours associated with increased risk, aligned with the wider behaviour improvement agenda.
- **Coaching Interventions:** Ongoing delivery of coaching education to reduce high-risk contact situations, with a continued focus on technique, decision-making, and safe practice.
- **Education and Awareness:** Expanded education for players, coaches, match officials, and parents, ensuring consistent understanding of symptoms, reporting, and return-to-play protocols.

Non-Contact Off-Season

The mandated non-contact off-season, introduced in 2024, continued into its second year with minimal disruption to clubs. Compliance remains strong, and monitoring will continue into 2026 to ensure the intended welfare benefits are realised.

Playing Calendar and NCRL Competition Structure

Work has continued with leagues and Competition Management Groups to refine the playing calendar, ensuring:

- a balanced mix of competitive and development-focused opportunities
- appropriate rest periods
- alignment with favourable weather windows
- reduced fixture congestion

These refinements support both player safety and the broader aims of the sport.

The NCRL framework will play a central role in embedding these welfare improvements. Although 2025 has required additional preparation and alignment work, the move to a unified national governance model will ultimately simplify delivery for clubs and volunteers. The NCRL ensures that brain health measures, tackle-height guidance, and season-planning principles are applied consistently across all regions, reducing administrative burden in the long term and strengthening the sport's ability to deliver safe, age-appropriate environments.

Under-6 and Under-7 Playing Offers

The introduction Tag for Under-6 and Under-7 players has continued to bed in successfully, providing a safer, development-appropriate entry point to the sport. This approach supports skill development, confidence, and enjoyment while reducing early exposure to contact. From 2026, this model will be extended to Under-8s, further strengthening the sport's commitment to age-appropriate progression and long-term player safety and development.

The Community Rugby League Strategy & Vision 2022-2030 is focused on three main areas, the first of which is:

CORE COMMUNITY

2025 has been a year of significant progress and structural change across the core community game. Participation across Primary, Junior, and Youth age groups has continued to grow, supported by targeted development activity, improved coaching support, and the expansion of alternate playing formats. Alongside this, the sport has created the National Community Rugby League (NCRL), designed to modernise delivery, strengthen consistency, and reduce the administrative burden on volunteers.

Bringing together 23 leagues under a single framework presents a significant challenge. We are grateful to the many volunteer leaders from various competitions for their collaborative efforts in delivering the sport cohesively. Change can be unsettling due to the fear of the unknown. However, those who have supported this process recognize the necessity for change and the benefits it will bring, even if they previously managed competitions that achieved sustained growth.

The creation of the National Community Rugby League (NCRL) represents the most substantial governance reform in over two decades and provides the structural foundation for long-term sustainability. As expected with a major transition, 2025 has required additional work from clubs, leagues, and volunteers to prepare for full implementation in 2026. Once embedded, the NCRL will bring consistent rules, clearer competition pathways, and reduced administrative burden, ensuring that growth in younger age groups is supported by a stable, modern, and development-appropriate competition framework.

While progress has been considerable, challenges remain — particularly in Open Age participation, behaviour, and regional disparities. The work undertaken this year provides a clearer foundation for addressing these issues as the sport moves into full NCRL implementation in 2026.

Our work in growing the game focused on two main areas: attracting new players and retaining new players from year to year. Every year our sport experiences player churn, i.e. many new players are attracted to the sport each year, whilst significant numbers are also lost to the sport. All sports experience such churn, but reducing the numbers will result in the number of participants increasing at a greater rate.

Growth through Retention

Retention remained a major focus throughout 2025, with work centred on improving the experience of young players, strengthening development environments, and reducing barriers to long-term participation. The year saw progress across Primary Rugby League, the Lions Development Programme (LDP), and junior competition structures, supported by closer alignment between community and performance pathways.

Improving Playing Experiences

The Lions Development Programme continued to offer alternative formats and environments that keep young people engaged in the sport beyond traditional club settings. More than 4,000 players took part in LDP activity during the year, supported by a national conference for clubs and Foundations to strengthen understanding of player development principles.

The successful two-player tackle pilot at Oulton demonstrated the impact of controlled formats on both player development and touchline behaviour, with further rollout planned for 2026.

Work also began on accrediting LDP delivery partners to ensure consistent standards and clearer governance across the programme.

Primary Rugby League at U6 and U7 was fully embedded as a Tag format nationally, helping create safer, more enjoyable early experiences. Over 350 players attended the national PRL festival at Gunnersbury Park, and more than 220 coaches accessed PRL workshops to support consistent delivery.

Collaboration with the Performance Department led to the introduction of new small-sided games that will become a core part of LDP activity from 2026, supporting the “One England” approach to player development.

Strengthening Junior Competition Structures

A significant area of progress in 2025 was the alignment of junior leagues ahead of the launch of the NCRL in 2026. This work has created the conditions for more consistent rules, reduced emphasis on winning at younger ages, and clearer influence over player development environments.

Coaching and Workforce Development

Supporting our Coaching workforce is a crucial part of our retention work as they directly affect the player experience and enjoyment which are critical factors for keeping players engaged.

Coach education continued to expand, with 25 coaches attending a Play Their Way engagement day delivered in partnership with UK Coaching and UNICEF, reinforcing child-centred coaching principles. The appointment of Anthony Atherton and Ellis Pascall will further strengthen coach development capacity in 2026.

Challenges and Learning

Retention work continues to face challenges, particularly around:

- traditional perceptions of junior competition and resistance to change
- inconsistent delivery of PRL and LDP activity in some areas

Priorities for 2026

The focus for 2026 will be on:

- supporting a smooth rollout of NCRL at junior level
- strengthening new competition structures
- implementing LDP accreditation
- reviewing junior playing formats and shaping competition models for 2027 onwards
- improving understanding of discipline trends within junior rugby and supporting clubs to address repeat issues
- developing a “Rugby Ready” physical literacy programme for new entrants
- increasing support for community clubs and parents
- ensuring workforce capacity reflects the growth of junior participation

England Community Lions

2025 was another positive year for the England Community Lions, with strong engagement across U16, U18, Women’s, and Universities programmes. The Lions continue to provide aspirational opportunities for community-based players, enhanced coach opportunities supporting retention at key transition points.

Engagement and Selection

- Over 900 nominations were received across all age groups.
- 125 players were selected to represent the England Community Lions.
- Players were drawn from a wide range of community clubs and regions, reflecting the strength and depth of the community game.

Programme Highlights

- U16 and U18 Lions delivered high-quality training and competitive fixtures, supporting player development and retention as players transition into Youth and Open Age Rugby League.
- Women’s Community Lions continued to grow, with increased nominations and meaningful representative opportunities for community-based female players.
- Universities Lions provided a representative pathway for Higher Education players, strengthening links between the university game and the wider community pathway.

Competitive Success

- England Universities Men retained the Men’s Presidents Cup, with victories over GB Teachers and UK Armed Forces.
- England Universities Men retained the Student Four Nations, defeating Scotland, Ireland, and Wales.
- The U18 Lions retained the Four Nations trophy, securing wins against Scotland (home), Ireland (away), and Wales (home).

- The U16 Lions finished joint runners-up in the Four Nations, after beating Scotland (home), drawing with Ireland (away), and narrowly losing to Wales (home).
- The Women’s Lions won the Tri-Nations Challenge, defeating Scotland Women 18–4 and Jamaica Women 38–6.
- The Women’s U21 Lions defeated the touring Wanderers 22–18, with the senior Women’s Lions also winning 28–24 against the Wanderers.
- U16 and U17 Regional Lions hosted Sud Provence (France) in a two-game series, gaining valuable international experience.

Contribution to the Community Game

The Lions programme continues to:

- provide aspirational opportunities that support retention
- reinforce behaviour, standards, and identity
- offer high-quality coaching and competitive experiences
- strengthen the connection between players and the community game
- The England Community Lions remain an important part of the sport’s commitment to being more than a sport — offering experiences that build confidence, pride, and long-term engagement.



PARTICIPANT GROWTH INITIATIVES

In addition to our specific retention programmes, we are also focused on reinvigorating and rebuilding traditional rugby league areas where participation has stagnated, and there is capacity for growth and continued expansion in developing and new areas where rugby league can have a positive impact in its communities.

Growth across the core community game in 2025 was steady but uneven, with progress concentrated in areas where strong partnerships, committed clubs, and consistent delivery capacity were in place. Much of the year focused on stabilising regions that had experienced disruption, supporting targeted development projects, and strengthening the foundations needed for sustainable expansion.

The North East experienced a year of consolidation, with participation stabilising at over 600 players. Early signs of renewed momentum emerged following the arrival of a new ownership group at Newcastle Thunder, although the absence of Foundation support means development activity will remain limited in 2026.

In North Yorkshire, more than 2,600 participants engaged in activity across the year, supported by ongoing efforts from York City Knights to grow the game in Harrogate, Scarborough, and Selby. Progress has been mixed, reflecting the challenges of establishing Rugby League in areas without historical roots or strong volunteer networks.

The most significant growth continued in North Lancashire, where a partnership with Wigan Warriors has delivered sustained impact. Since 2022, 18 new teams have been formed, taking the total from 34 to 52, with 965 registered players and further increases expected in younger age groups. We are looking at a similar model to support West Cumbria to bring similar impetus to that region.

Growth work continues to be affected by several structural challenges. Delivery capacity varies significantly across Foundations. The withdrawal of Newcastle Rugby Foundation from Rugby League delivery poses a risk to participation in the North East. However, as is often the case, they remain a committed group of volunteers with whom we are working to build the game in the region.

The implementation of the NCRL has contributed to increased workload for staff and volunteers in 2025, which is expected during a transition. This short-term pressure is a necessary step toward a more modern and consistent system. Once fully embedded, the NCRL will streamline governance, clarify responsibilities, and reduce the administrative burden on clubs and volunteers. This will allow growth work to be more targeted, more sustainable, and less dependent on local administrative capacity, ensuring that investment and delivery translate into measurable outcomes.

The year reinforced the importance of focusing growth efforts where there is existing appetite, history, or infrastructure. Areas such as Scarborough and Selby demonstrate that even limited Rugby League heritage can provide a foothold, whereas relying on rugby union partners to support expansion remains unpredictable.

The focus for 2026 will be on building sustainable, locally-rooted growth that supports long-term participation rather than short-term spikes, ensuring Rugby League continues to expand in a way that is realistic, resilient, and aligned with the sport's wider strategic priorities.

SOCIAL RUGBY LEAGUE

Social Rugby League continues to provide flexible, enjoyable, and accessible opportunities for people to take part in the sport outside of traditional club structures. These formats support lifelong participation, offer low-barrier entry points, and help retain players who may not wish to engage in full-contact Rugby League. In 2025, Social Rugby League saw steady growth across several formats, reflecting the increasing demand for inclusive, adaptable ways to stay active and connected to the sport.

Overall Participation

Social Rugby League participation increased from 14,607 in 2024 to 14,792 in 2025. Growth was driven primarily by Touch and Masters, with stable participation across other formats.

Format Breakdown

- Touch Rugby League: Participation increased by 17% (1,232 → 1,447), supported by workplace leagues, mixed-gender sessions, and increased delivery by Foundations.
- Masters Rugby League: Participation increased by 3% (2,100 → 2,164). Masters continues to offer a welcoming, social environment for older players, with several clubs reporting increased female participation.
- Try Tag Rugby League: Participation remained broadly stable, with strong engagement in urban areas and workplace settings.
- X-League: Participation decreased slightly due to fewer events being delivered in 2025. Work is underway to review delivery models and support Foundations to re-establish activity.
- Walking Rugby League: Participation remained steady, with strong engagement from older adults and those returning to activity after injury or illness.



INCREASE THE NUMBER OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

Together with specific initiatives linked to growing the game through improved retention and various growth initiatives, we have specific interventions to increase the number of female participants.

We aim to achieve this through a mixture of new girls' growth programmes, appropriate competition offers and building out our talent pathway.

Futures

The Futures programme continued to support the creation and development of girls' teams across both the North and South.

- In the North, targeted support helped several clubs deliver first-time activity at younger age groups, with many progressing to establish full teams and enter fixtures.
- In the South, multiple teams took part across a range of age groups, combining weekly training with festival-based activity.

For 2026, the Northern programme has moved to an open application model, allowing clubs with emerging demand to apply for support. Applications will be peer-reviewed and approved by the Girls Management Committee to ensure new teams have a clear route into structured competition when ready.

RugBees

RugBees continued to be delivered through Foundations, supported by a new tiered funding model linked to delivery standards.

- Foundations with strong existing programmes continued to grow and reported wider club benefits.
- Foundations requiring additional support will receive place-based delivery, including "on the road" activity in partnership with local clubs.
- Overall engagement increased, with more girls accessing early-stage opportunities through the programme.

Women's Rugby League

The women's game continued to expand, with growth across all regions and strengthened competition structures.

- Northern Regions: Northern League 2 expanded from 6 to 8 teams, completing a full playing pyramid across the region.
- Midlands: Increased team numbers and improved commitment to home-and-away fixtures.
- South: Playing standards increased as four teams moved into a higher tier (13-a-side, home/away). Work continues to rebuild the entry-level competition.

Women's Championship

The Championship delivered a highly competitive season:

- Featherstone Rovers earned promotion back to the Women's Super League after defeating London Broncos in the play-off final.
- Swinton Lionesses and Salford Red Devils strengthened their squads, contributing to a five-team contest for play-off places.
- The top four was only decided on the final day of the regular season.

Cup Competitions

2025 saw the introduction of the Challenge Shield and Challenge Plate, providing meaningful knockout opportunities for Tier 2 and Tier 3 teams.

- Shield winners: Swinton Lionesses
- Plate winners: Halifax Panthers
- Finals hosted at Featherstone in May

Girls Rugby League

The Girls League continued its strong upward trajectory, with more players, more teams, and more clubs involved than in previous years.

- A consistent competition calendar was introduced across all age groups.
- A Premier Division was added at U15 to support the growing depth of talent.
- More fixtures were completed than in previous seasons, supported by improved administration and the move to paperless team sheets.

As participation increases, behaviour and discipline remain areas of focus. Work is underway to strengthen expectations and education to ensure a positive playing environment for all involved.

The NCRL framework will support this growth by introducing consistent rules, behaviour standards, and competition structures across all regions. While the transition requires additional alignment work in 2025, the long-term impact will be a clearer, more consistent environment for players, coaches, and volunteers. As the Girls League continues to expand, the NCRL will ensure that expectations are transparent, sanctions are consistent, and the playing environment remains positive, safe, and development-focused.

Applications for 2026 show further expansion, with new clubs entering the offer and strong interest across all age groups.

Player Development Programmes

The Pathway to Performance (P2P) programme completed its first full year, providing high-quality coaching for talented players identified as potential future Academy athletes. Players progressed into Girls Hubs for mid-season representative fixtures delivered by the Performance Department.

The first U19 Academy season was completed successfully, with new rules for 2026 rewarding clubs that develop homegrown players by exempting Academy graduates from squad list limits.

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY GAME

Supporting the long-term sustainability of community clubs remained a key focus throughout 2025. The RFL continued to provide guidance, signposting, and practical support to help clubs strengthen governance, improve resilience, and access opportunities that enhance their off-field stability.

Clubs were supported to use development planning tools where appropriate, helping them identify priorities and access investment. This was particularly valuable for clubs operating in economically diverse communities, many of whom are working towards becoming Community Wellbeing Hubs to deepen their connection with local residents.

Partnership working continued to play an important role. The RFL collaborated with Foundations, national governing bodies, government departments, and sector organisations to ensure clubs could access relevant advice, funding opportunities, and specialist support. This included helping clubs explore new sustainability initiatives such as energy-efficiency solutions, income-generation models, and community-focused partnerships.

Clubs also benefited from targeted support programmes delivered through Foundations and partners, including kit and equipment donations, volunteer development workshops, and access to resources designed to strengthen governance and operational confidence.

Despite this progress, clubs continue to face significant pressures. Rising energy costs, increasing facility charges, and wider cost-of-living challenges have placed strain on finances. Volunteer capacity remains a concern, with many clubs reporting difficulties in recruiting and retaining people for key roles. Access to high-quality facilities and pitches also continues to be a challenge in some areas.

Looking ahead to 2026, the focus will remain on strengthening club resilience, expanding volunteer support, and working with partners to create sustainable opportunities for clubs to grow and thrive within their communities.



SPORT GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

National Community Rugby League (NCRL)

2025 was a year of preparation and alignment ahead of the full launch of the National Community Rugby League (NCRL) in 2026. The focus throughout the year was on designing a modern governance framework, consulting with leagues and volunteers, and putting in place the structures needed to support a more consistent, sustainable, and development-focused community game.

Purpose of the NCRL

The NCRL was developed to address long-standing challenges within the community game, including inconsistent rules, variable standards, duplicated administration, and unclear pathways between competitions. The new framework introduces a single, aligned structure for all community competitions from U12 to Open Age, providing:

- clearer expectations for clubs and volunteers
- consistent discipline processes
- improved competition integrity
- a more supportive and transparent operating environment

The NCRL is designed to reduce administrative burden over time, strengthen behaviour standards, and ensure that competitions are delivered in a way that reflects the needs of today's community game.

NCRL Governance Structure

The NCRL will be overseen through a set of aligned management groups that ensure competitions are delivered locally but governed within a consistent national framework. These groups provide clarity around decision-making, accountability, and standards across all age groups:

- National Community Rugby League Management Group – provides national oversight, sets policy, and ensures consistency across all community competitions.
- Men's Management Group is responsible for delivering standards and the competition model for men's open-age Rugby League, including the new tiered structure.
- Youth & Junior Management Group – oversees competitions from U12 to U18, ensuring alignment with development principles, behaviour standards, and national rules.
- National Primary Steering Group – leads the governance of Primary Rugby League, which sits outside the competition structure but remains part of the NCRL governance model. This group ensures PRL remains child-centred, inclusive, and development-focused.

This structure ensures that Primary Rugby League is governed with the same clarity and consistency as other parts of the game, while recognising its distinct purpose and developmental ethos.

Progress in 2025

Significant progress was made throughout 2025 to prepare for implementation:

- **Competition Rules:** Drafting and alignment work ensured that terminology, structures, and processes are consistent with the RFL Operational Rules.
- **Competition Management Groups (CMGs):** CMGs were designed and prepared for rollout in 2026, including Terms of Reference, role descriptions, and reporting lines. This ensures competitions remain locally delivered but governed within a clear national framework.
- **Men's Open Age Tiered Model:** A tiered competition structure was developed to support balanced competition, reduce mismatches, and create clearer progression pathways. This will be finalised and implemented for the 2026 season.
- **Primary Rugby League:** PRL was separated from the competition structure to reflect its development-first ethos. A dedicated steering group will oversee standards, safeguarding, and festival coordination to ensure PRL remains child-centred and inclusive.
- **Volunteer Engagement:** Given the scale of change, early engagement with volunteers was prioritised. This included communication on future roles, reassurance around league identity, and the creation of resources to support clubs through the transition.

Volunteer Contribution

A significant number of volunteers have already stepped forward to support the transition into the new governance model. Their willingness to take on roles within the Competition Management Groups has been central to the progress made in 2025. These volunteers bring experience, credibility, and a deep understanding of their local competitions, ensuring that the NCRL is shaped and delivered by people who know the community game best. Their contribution has strengthened the foundations for 2026 and reflects the commitment and pride that underpin community Rugby League.

Although full implementation begins in 2026, early benefits are already visible, including clearer governance, reduced duplication, improved alignment between competitions, and stronger foundations for behaviour and welfare improvements.

Priorities for 2026

- full implementation of NCRL rules and minimum standards
- launch of the competition pyramid
- embedding CMGs into day-to-day delivery
- supporting clubs and volunteers through the transition
- strengthening match official recruitment and welfare
- improving fixture completion and matchday environments
- ensuring PRL remains high-quality, inclusive, and development-focused



Southern Regions Update

2025 was a year of stabilisation and steady growth across the Southern Regions, with progress driven by stronger competition structures, improved local delivery capacity, and targeted support for clubs and volunteers. The focus remained on building sustainable foundations, strengthening participation offers, and ensuring that the South continues to develop as a meaningful part of the national Rugby League landscape.

Competition Delivery and Infrastructure

The introduction of designated Competition Management and Administration support made a significant difference to the stability of Southern competitions. This consistency allowed for clearer communication, improved fixture management, and freed up resources to focus on priority development areas.

The RFL Data Team provided improved insight into participation trends, volunteer capacity, and club health, giving the region a more accurate baseline from which to plan and prioritise.

Competition structures continued to evolve, supported by the Competition Management Group and RFL Operations. This included reshaping formats, strengthening the InspiredBy 9s and Champion Schools offers, and introducing representative opportunities such as the Harry Jepson programme.

Participation and Growth

Participation across the Southern Regions increased in 2025, with strong growth in Girls Rugby League, Primary and Junior activity, and Wheelchair Rugby League. The London Junior League continued to expand, and pockets of new activity emerged in the West of England.

Women and Girls development was supported through targeted seed funding, festivals, and club-led delivery. The continued rise of the London Broncos Women — now competing in the Championship and pushing for WSL promotion — reflects the growing depth and ambition within the region.

Wheelchair Rugby League exceeded expectations, with ten teams now active across the South and a dedicated Southern League established. The success of the London Roosters in the Super League has further raised the profile of the format and inspired new entrants.

Key learning from 2025 emphasised the need to prioritise, remain flexible, and focus resources where they will have the greatest impact. Strengthening vulnerable clubs, reinforcing player pathways, and working collaboratively with strong clubs and volunteers — particularly where Foundations are not present — remain essential to sustainable growth.



COMMUNITY GAME ENVIRONMENTS

Creating safe, positive, and enjoyable environments across the community game remained a major priority in 2025. Following the mid-year Respect and Discipline communication to all clubs, the sport took a more proactive and consistent approach to setting expectations, supporting volunteers, and addressing behaviour that undermines the experience of players, coaches, match officials, and families.

The Respect programme continues to underpin this work, reinforcing the values and behaviours that define Rugby League and ensuring that every participant can enjoy the game in a safe and supportive setting.

Raising Standards and Setting Clear Expectations

The mid-year communication marked an important step in strengthening behavioural standards across the community game. It provided clarity on expectations for conduct, outlined the responsibilities of clubs and volunteers, and set out the consequences for serious or repeated breaches.

This shift has helped:

- reinforce consistent codes of conduct across all age groups and formats
- support match officials by promoting respect and fair treatment
- strengthen club leadership and accountability
- provide clearer processes for managing behaviour and safeguarding concerns

A more structured approach to discipline has also been introduced, with a focus on whole-club responsibility and improved visibility of trends and patterns.

Education, Support and Culture Change

Alongside firmer accountability, significant emphasis has been placed on education and support. This has included:

- delivery of Game Day Manager training to strengthen matchday leadership
- increased visibility and compliance checks at fixtures
- targeted support for clubs working to improve their environments
- sharing positive examples of clubs demonstrating strong values and leadership

This balanced approach, combining education, support, and proportionate intervention, is helping to embed long-term cultural change and strengthen the matchday experience for everyone involved.

Club Commitment and Progress

The vast majority of clubs remain fully committed to creating positive environments and have taken proactive steps to reinforce expectations with players, parents, and spectators. Many have strengthened internal communication, improved matchday organisation, and supported volunteers in managing behaviour.

This collective effort is essential to ensuring that Rugby League remains a sport defined by respect, enjoyment, and community spirit.

EDUCATION

2025 was a year of meaningful progress across schools, colleges, and universities, with strengthened competition structures, increased engagement, and closer alignment between the education sector and the wider community game. The focus remained on providing high-quality, development-focused opportunities for young people while supporting brain health recommendations and ensuring that Rugby League remains visible and accessible across the education landscape.

Schools

The first year of the revised Champion Schools format for boys was successfully delivered. The new pool-based structure created a more varied mix of fixtures, enabling schools to play opponents and visit locations they would not previously have encountered. The format also reduced fixture volume for the strongest Rugby League regions, supporting brain health recommendations by managing overall playing load for pupils who are already active within the community game.

Several refinements were introduced for the 2025/26 season, including the introduction of a competition entry fee to bring the programme in line with other national school competitions. Rules for the girls' competition were also updated to more closely align with community Rugby League, with the only retained difference being the continuation of 11-a-side following consultation with participating schools.

Inspired By 9s continued to grow, supported by Foundation partners. Engagement increased again in 2025, with strong participation reported through School Games dashboards and Upshot. The format remains an important entry point for schools and a key contributor to overall growth in school-based Rugby League.

A collaboration with the RFU and England Touch to create a unified Primary School rugby offer within the School Games framework is nearing completion. This joint approach will be promoted nationally through the Youth Sport Trust in early 2026, increasing visibility and strengthening Rugby League's presence within School Games Organiser networks and Active Partnerships.



Colleges

The boys' college competition continued to evolve, with new champions emerging and a revised format trialled for 2025/26. Early-season 9s festivals and accelerated cup rounds allowed colleges to assess their playing standard before entering the most appropriate league. This approach supported competitive balance and responded directly to feedback from participating institutions.

The continued involvement of professional club Development Academies has raised playing standards for some colleges, creating a noticeable gap between supported and unsupported teams. This widening gap has contributed to a reduction in Premier League playing numbers, with some colleges choosing not to nominate into the top tier to avoid mismatched fixtures. This will be reviewed ahead of the 2026/27 season to ensure that the Premier League remains competitive and attractive for all colleges.

Girls' college activity continued to build in both quality and consistency. The 2025/26 season began with the highest number of teams to date, supported by regular bi-weekly festivals hosted by participating colleges. This structure has provided meaningful, frequent playing opportunities and strengthened engagement across the year.

Universities

The university game continued to strengthen across both the men's and women's pathways. The BUCS National League completed its first full season with strong delivery and competitive balance, culminating in a new champion for the first time in almost a decade. Northumbria continued their success across the 9s formats and the Women's Winter League, maintaining their unbeaten run in women's university Rugby League.

A major milestone for the sector was the confirmation that Women's 9s will become a BUCS-sanctioned competition from 2026. This is the result of three years of collaborative development, delivery, and evidence-building, and represents a significant step forward for the women's pathway. For the first time, female students will be able to represent their university in an officially recognised Rugby League competition, with BUCS points attached. This is expected to drive the creation of new teams and increase opportunities for women to continue playing while in higher education.

Workforce Development

The Introduction to Teaching Rugby League course continued to support the future education workforce, providing trainee teachers with the knowledge and confidence to deliver Rugby League in school settings. Delivery expanded in 2025, including a new partnership with the University of Cumbria, ensuring that more Initial Teacher Education students are equipped to embed Rugby League within their future schools.

SOCIAL IMPACT

2025 marked a significant step forward for Rugby League's social impact mission, with the formal establishment of the RFL Community Trust and continued growth in programmes that use the power of the sport to improve lives, strengthen communities, and tackle inequalities. Working alongside Foundations, clubs, partners, and the wider Rugby League family, the Trust has helped position Rugby League as a force for positive change across health, wellbeing, education, employability, and social cohesion.

RFL Community Trust

A major milestone was achieved in February 2025 with the official registration of the RFL Community Trust as a charity. The Trust provides a dedicated vehicle to drive the sport's social impact ambitions, working in partnership with Foundations and external organisations under the OurLeague Life brand.

Twenty-five Foundations have now met the minimum standards required to partner with the Trust, demonstrating strong governance, delivery capability, and commitment to social impact. This network is well-placed to collaborate on future consortium programmes and national initiatives.

Week of Social Impact

The "Week of Social Impact" 2025 served as a weeklong campaign where the RFL and the RFL Community Trust joined our charitable Foundations in spotlighting the incredible work that's ongoing within our communities and celebrate all that has been achieved so far. Specifically, this year's Week of Social Impact was focused on "Building a Better Future" and consisted of authentic, story-telling content that focused on the Rugby League Family (our communities) and opportunities within the sport that go beyond the 80 minutes. This ran from Monday 20th October 2025, with a [WOSI 2025 highlights booklet released](#) at the end of January 2026.

Finally, we were also pleased to share the RFL 2025 Foundation of the Year winner as Wigan Warriors Community Trust and the two runner ups as Leigh Community Trust & Castleford Tigers Foundation. The award was presented at half time of the Men's Betfred Super League Grand Final on Saturday 11 October to mark the outstanding achievement by Wigan Warriors Community Trust.

Key 2025 Programmes:

Community Wellbeing Hubs

The network of accredited Community Wellbeing Hubs is continuing to slowly grow with Thatto Heath Crusaders ARLFC launching in 2025 making a total of nine Hubs. A wider 31 community clubs are part of the supportive CWH network and working towards their accreditations. We aim to strive beyond our target of establishing 30 OurLeague Life Community Wellbeing Hubs by 2030. However, one of the challenges continues to be expanding out of the North of England. Although club visits have taken place in the South we have not yet accredited a southern region club. We aim to continue to support those who expressed an interest to build towards this.

Regional Active Partners are also interested in this programme linked to the Placed Based working models, so is a future opportunity of working more closely with those.

Lead the Game

This programme ended in March 2025, will a full evaluation report produced April 2025.

Lead the Game was a pioneering joint venture between The RFL and the Veterans Foundation, that aimed to offer more veterans a structured pathway towards becoming qualified match officials. The programme engaged 21 veterans via Rugby League club foundations at Hull FC, Newcastle Rugby Foundation, and Warrington Wolves. In addition to match officials' accreditation, the programme aimed to improve mental wellbeing, support education and progression into employment, and to help veterans strengthen personal connections within their local communities.

A key challenge was recruitment of participants for this programme, as although it was marketed low sign-up numbers were seen across the regions.

Inspiring Futures

Delivery of this programme finished in 2025. This included over 100 school sites, 1,200 young people and 11 Rugby League Foundation delivery partners. Funded by The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) this programme included 12 mentoring sessions for students in years 8 and 9 that focuses on three broad topics – Personal Wellbeing, Collaboration, and Leadership, all aimed at supporting youths who are at risk of anti-social behaviour and youth crime. A full report produced by IPSOS will be released in March 2026 evidencing the impact of this programme.

Tackle Our Life

Is an employability and skills programme. The concept is focused on creating new, 'Rugby League inspired' opportunities that empower young people aged between 16-18 to develop skills, knowledge, and confidence to achieve greater life outcomes. Tackle Our Life has been developed in response to widely available evidence suggesting people growing up in areas of high deprivation are more likely to face challenges with their mental health, attain lower education grades, and become unemployed in later life. It is delivered by our professional club charitable foundations in partnership with SCL Education. It equals to 16 hours a week in the exciting and insightful environment of our foundations for the young person on the programme to develop essential skills to support their life outcomes.

In 2025, Leeds Rhinos Foundation first launched this programme, and all Foundations are able to also build a programme with an education partner when capacity and the work area aligns with their Foundations objectives. A challenge is the different regional funding opportunities available to each Foundation to deliver this activity.



We're on the Same Team

This programme aims to tackle bullying, discrimination and prejudice in young people before it is formed and has been accessed by 51 Schools, Community Clubs and Foundations. It is a simple and inspiring education piece that helps young people to understand the impact of their words and behaviours on other people, and how we all thrive when we're On the Same Team. Using the stories of Rugby League role models and players in the Community Integrated Care Learning Disability Super League, it is uniquely powerful and engaging.

Community Integrated Care, the RFL's official care partner has developed the engaging content, and we are working together to create a long-standing accessible model for Foundations to use at various delivery sites to positively impact young people.

New Partners in 2025:

The Social Impact team have been continuing to develop partnerships, funding and showcasing opportunities for 'OurLeague Life' the sports social impact vehicle. In 2025 new partners include:

Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) - Youth Guarantee

A new partnership was formed with the government's DWP in September following the RFL's participation in the Secretary of State for DWP round table discussion on their Youth Guarantee, confirming Rugby League will be involved in the Youth Hub initiative going forward along with the Premier League and EFL in the Community Foundations. This aims to support 16–24-year-olds into education or employment.

UK Parliament Week

UK Parliament Week (UKPW) is an annual event, spreading the word about what Parliament is, what it does and how you can get involved. UKPW is an annual opportunity for schools, youth groups, and community organisations across the UK to discover more about UK Parliament, what it does, and how they can get involved. With over 2.4 million people signed up in all 650 constituencies, UKPW is UK Parliament's biggest public engagement programme.

Parkinsons UK

Strategic support for the game to upskill our sports workforce. The partnership launched the Foundation CPD series in October 2025. The series of support will continue into 2026 covering various topics for our Foundation workforce to attend optional CPD on a variety of topics. RL Cares have also contributed to the series with the National Association for Social Prescribing. With 17 Foundations attending the optional CPD sessions so far. In 2026, we will start with Mental Health First Aid CPD provided by RL Cares.

HYN United

We formally joined the Humber and North Yorkshire UNITED collective, a pioneering initiative launched in April 2025 to unite sport in Humber and North Yorkshire around mental health, suicide prevention, and self-harm awareness. Humber and North Yorkshire UNITED will reach participants and clubs across all levels of sport, from under-6s to walking sports, paving the way for improved mental health awareness and access to support for potentially hundreds of thousands of people.

Easy Fundraising

We've teamed up with easyfundraising to help you raise money for community clubs. Whether the need is a new kit, lower subs, or clubhouse improvements, easyfundraising can support their goals. Through just shopping online with any of 8,000+ retailers – from supermarkets to travel sites – they send clubs a donation at no extra cost. In just three months, over 30 clubs have registered with easyfundraising, a brilliant start that shows the appetite among clubs to find new ways to support their teams and local communities. Historically, Rugby League clubs have received a share of nearly £50,000 in free funding through easyfundraising, simply by doing their everyday online shopping.

Raise Your Game

A partnership with Raise Your Game was launched as a regular income generation avenue for the RFL Community Trust, based on donations into a prize draw through a call to action of the community work this would support. Professional Rugby League Clubs and Foundations have more success than the RFL on this platform, so a change will be made in 2026 to make the most of the opportunity the platform provides.

Community Game Sustainability

A network of 33 partner Rugby League Foundations has delivered an outstanding amount of social impact in 2025 to their community. The network of Foundations continues to share best practice at 3 Foundations forum events across the year to receive RFL updates and hear about new opportunities from our partners but to also share learnings and best practice. Similarly, the network of 9 accredited and 31 developing Community Wellbeing Hubs have 3 network meetings a year. Finally, 3 Foundations Sustainability Network meetings took place including a small group of Foundations with varying size, experience, focus areas and locations to gain feedback directly from them and collaboration on project planning. The core aims of supporting governance, foundation health and showcasing were a focus alongside development of the new charitable vehicle.

Strategy Target Progress 2025:

- 12 partners in Social Impact across a diverse range of sectors, including Easy Fundraising, Raise Your Game, Department of Work & Pensions, Humber & North Yorkshire UNITED and Parkinsons UK who are all additional in 2025. Whilst maintaining Youth Endowment Fund, Community Integrated Care, RL Cares, Access Sport, Grass Maintenance Association, AXA XL Insurance, SCL Education Group.
- £173,227 of additional income from our continued Youth Endowment Fund partnership to deliver Inspiring Futures. Since 2022, we have generated £1,006,623 of additional income for the wider sport to deliver social impact into the heart of our community.
- 9 Our League Life Community Wellbeing Hubs established. Proudly presenting the accreditation to Thatto Heath Crusaders in 2025 whilst maintaining Shevington Sharks, West Hull, Portico Vine, Salford City Roosters, West Leeds, Hull Wyke, Ashton Bears, Cadishead Rhinos on the accreditation.
- 3.5% increase in volunteers with 6,213 active. Since 2022, total volunteer participation has increased by 1,270 volunteers supporting individual development and improving physical and mental health.
- On-going work on all targets and measurements contained within the RFL's environment sustainability strategy relating to social impact.

Priorities and Recommendations for 2026

Programmes:

- A final independent evaluation will be completed to determine if the Inspiring Futures programme and using sport as a hook is an effective method to engage and change behaviours of young people at risk of crime and violent actions.
- Support 5 new Community Wellbeing Hubs to gain their accreditation, making 14 in total who positively impact their local communities.
- Finalise a Foundation delivery model for We're On The Same Team, in partnership with Community Integrated Care.
- Increase work on the Youth Guarantee, specifically the Youth Hub initiative working in partnership with the Department of Work & Pensions.
- Develop a recognition programme for Try Force our volunteer workforce.

INCLUSIVE PLAYING OFFERS

2025 has been a significant year of achievement and growth. Throughout 2024, as reported previously, there was a transition within the sport to become more inclusive through focusing on impairment-specific parameters to participation. Whilst this led to a slight decline in participation, as those previously playing without relevant impairments found alternative participation opportunities, it brought greater equity and increased space for those whose impairments do not allow them to engage in the sport more widely. Remaining steadfast to this principle, in 2025, has seen a complete recovery in participation and subsequently record figures of registration and engagement from appropriate audiences. This gives greater confidence that more people with significant impairments and a lack of opportunity to engage elsewhere are more readily finding a home in our sport.

Wheelchair Rugby League

Wheelchair Rugby League has continued to expand, supported by the introduction of a full open pyramid of participation. Seven clubs were awarded Super League licences for a three-year period, with an eighth expected in 2026, giving teams stability and a clear development pathway. Edinburgh Giants became the first Scottish club admitted to an elite Rugby League competition. Below the elite level, participation has grown significantly, with two regionalised Championship conferences, cross-conference play-offs, and a wider national merit offer. Team numbers increased from 25 to 34, and games played rose from 137 to 169, demonstrating both growth and improved sustainability. Further refinements to the national structure and cup competitions are planned for 2026.



Physical Disability Rugby League (PDRL)

PDRL has also seen a complete recovery in participation, driven in part by the introduction of the Medequip Cup — a representative, origin-style competition for classified athletes. Sixty players took part across Lancashire and Yorkshire, competing at major venues including Headingley and Robin Park. Player feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with many describing it as their most enjoyable experience in the sport. Domestic competition also strengthened, with more fixtures completed and improved adherence to participation rules. The creation of the first PDRL Player Advisory Group has enhanced communication and player voice, supporting ongoing development. Overall, the number of active participants increased by 7%, and fixture completion rose from 60% to 90%.

Learning Disability Rugby League (LDRL)

LDRL has similarly rebounded, achieving record registrations in 2025 following the introduction of clearer eligibility parameters. The programme benefited from increased opportunities to play at major events, including Magic Weekend and the Challenge Cup Semi-Final Double Header. It also received national recognition, winning the Care Innovator Award at the Great British Care Awards. Participant feedback highlights the programme's impact: improved confidence, increased physical activity, stronger social connections, and greater independence. Further enhancements to education, CPD, and festival structures are planned for 2026.

Tryz Programme

The Tryz programme delivered in partnership with Access Sport, has continued to progress. The programme has been introduced to more traditional areas of Rugby League as an alternative and meaningful engagement opportunity for junior participants living with disability. Reporting through upshot, we have seen 117 juniors engage in the programme, giving them an introduction to the sport, with a view that as they progress they can engage in impairment specific offers such as those discussed above.

Facilities Update

Recent work has focused heavily on facility investment across the community game, delivered in partnership with organisations such as Sport England, the Football Foundation, and local authorities. This includes:

- Major capital projects developing and upgrading 3G pitches across multiple regions, with several sites completed and others currently in construction or planning.
- A substantial programme of grass pitch improvements, supported by national maintenance funding and a further £1.8m pipeline scheduled for delivery before March 2026.
- A series of small-scale infrastructure grants supporting clubs with fencing, changing room refurbishments, social space improvements, sustainability measures, and other essential upgrades.
- Ongoing work linked to Sport England's Statutory Consultee role, including responding to planning applications and contributing to local playing pitch strategies.
- Engagement with DCMS as part of the wider £400m grassroots sport investment, ensuring Rugby League facilities are represented within national funding streams.

Volunteering

Volunteering has continued to grow across Rugby League, with 2025 recording a further 3.5% increase and 6,213 active volunteers supporting the game. Since 2022, overall volunteer participation has risen by 1,270 people, reflecting both the strength of club communities and the impact of targeted support programmes.

The RFL's central volunteer programme, Try Force, has had its most successful year to date. Across the season, 56 volunteer opportunities were advertised through the online portal, with the majority supporting RFL Development Team events. The platform now includes more than 540 registered volunteers, with around 100 active contributors giving nearly 700 hours of support to development activity in 2025. Alongside this, the online resource offer has continued to expand, including the launch of a new learning module for Club Welfare Officers on the EtrainU platform and ongoing updates to the wider library of volunteer recruitment, onboarding, and retention tools.

As part of the refreshed Southern Regions strategy, focused support has been directed towards the most vulnerable clubs to strengthen long-term sustainability. This has included the creation of a new Volunteer Recruitment Plan and refreshed Club Development Plan and Club Health Check tools. Between October 2025 and March 2026, targeted work with identified clubs will help build capacity across playing offers, governance, finances, facilities, and local visibility, with the intention of extending this model to additional clubs if successful.

Volunteers Week 2025, held from 2 June, provided an opportunity to celebrate the stories and impact of volunteers across the game. Case studies, including a feature on Thatto Heath Crusaders ARLFC, highlighted the culture and commitment that underpin community Rugby League. The RFL also contributed to wider sector learning by sharing insights from the Greater Manchester Moving volunteer recruitment project at a regional Community of Practice session.

The year concluded with the 2025 Community Volunteer Awards, recognising outstanding contributions across eight categories. Awards were presented at local community events to ensure volunteers were celebrated among the people who matter most, with all winners invited to attend either the Men's Betfred Super League Grand Final or the ABK Beer Ashes Test at Wembley.



CONGRATULATIONS TO

Craig Teague
Volunteer of the Year



John Moran
Coach of the Year



Andrew Blythe
Junior Coach of the Year



David Newton & David Cross
Grounds Person of the Year



Julie Lumb
Women & Girls Champion



Barrow Island Oldies
OuRLeague Life Award



Michelle Melling
Tackle IT Award



Helen Hynes
Social RL Volunteer of the Year

