

Community Rugby League MORE THAN A SPORT REVIEW MID-YEAR 2024



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Executive Summary

- The Community Board has been revamped to better represent the more diverse facets of the sport.
- Overall, the 2024 mid-year number of active participants is broadly the same with similar trends as reported in 2023.
- The number of men's open-age competitions and teams remains stable although the number of participants shows a slight decrease.
- The expansion of the Lion's Development Programme is a positive step in fostering long-term growth through retention.
- Progress across our social offers has been mixed. Try Tag Rugby continues to show substantial progress.
- The Women's Super League has been restructured as part of a drive to create more competitive and sustainable leagues across the country.
- The Girl's League has seen a 22% increase with a new U18's League introduced.
- Over 5,500 secondary schools' pupils took part in our Inspired By 9's competition which continues to grow.
- The number of schools participating in Champion Schools has increased with an 18% rise in girls participating.
- Men's university teams will compete in a new National League from September 2024, and we have successfully launched a Women's League.
- A greater focus on more specialist offers across Wheelchair RL, PDRL, LDRL.
- The introduction of several Brain Health recommendations has not resulted in any material impact on the number of participants.
- The new RFL Charity 'The Rugby League Community Trust' is due to launch in the autumn.
- Our partnership with the Youth Endowment Fund has further invested £582,000 in our Inspiring Futures programme delivered through 11 Foundations.
- We are delivering against our Volunteer Strategy providing greater recognition and support for an increasing number of volunteers.
- The publishing of the RFL National Community Facilities Strategy has highlighted the investment required to support the community game up to 2030.

Introduction

Welcome to the Mid-Year 2024 Community Rugby League More Than a Sport Update. This update summarises the activity undertaken by the RFL's Development Team between January and August 2024. We are grateful for the ongoing support of Sport England and Our League Active, the RFL membership scheme without which our work would not be possible.

The work of the Development Team contributes to The Community Strategy & Vision 2022-2030 which is available on the RFL website and can be found here.

This includes a focus on three key areas: -

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



Active Participant Updates

As is the norm we report to Sport England twice yearly on the number of active participants. This reporting takes place at the end of August (mid-year) and December (end of year). The mid-year reporting tends to focus on the number of participants taking part within core community clubs' settings with more comprehensive reporting including social and education activity produced at the end of the year.

Following the RLWC2021 which drove growth in participation and accelerated growth in the numbers of participants in women and girls and disability taking up the sport a key focus for 2024 was consolidation. This includes bedding in of new formats and structures and particularly in the case of our disability offers a greater focus on more specialised appropriate participation.

Overall, the 2024 mid-year figures are broadly the same with similar trends as those reported in 2023.

A summary of the initial data findings below:

Core Community Breakdown

Core Community - Age / Gender								
Core Indicators	Baseline	Year 2 - 22/23		Year 3 - 23/24		Year 4 - 24/25		% Diff Mid-Year
		Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	End of Year	
U7 to U11 (Primary)	12,000	13,030	13,610	13,615	14,602	13,673		0.4%
Boys		11,682	12,197	11,809	12,430	11,730		-1%
Girls		1,348	1,413	1,806	2,172	1,943		8%
U12 to U15 (Junior)	9,400	10,870	11,048	11,579	11,839	12,070		
Boys		9,235	9,359	9,272	9,419	9,568		3%
Girls		1,635	1,689	2,307	2,474	2,502		8%
U16 to U18 (Youth)	4,800	5,266	5,448	5,226	5,437	5,751		
Boys		4,435	4,559	4,463	4,639	4,734		6%
Girls		831	889	763	798	1017		33%
Open Age	18,099	10,800	11,503	11,085	11,492	10,457		
Men		9,575	10,140	9,502	9,768	8,906		-6%
Women		1,225	1,363	1,583	1,694	1,551		-2%
Totals Male	0	34,927	36,255	35,046	36,286	34,938		-0.3%
Total Female	0	5,039	5,354	6,459	7,138	7,013		9%
TOTAL		39,966	41,609	41,505	43,424	41,951		1%

Women & Girls

Women & Girls	
Core Indicators	Aug 2024
Primary (U7 to U11)	1,943
Youth (U12 to U15)	2,502
Junior (U16 to U18)	1,017
Open Age	1,551
Total	7,013

Age

- Primary Age registrations are the same vs Mid-Year 2023 (+0.4%)
- Junior Age is up 4% vs Mid-Year 2023
- Youth is up 10% vs Mid-Year 2023
- Open Age is down -7% vs Mid-Year 2023

Gender

- Male registrations are down at Open Age (-6%) but up across Youth and Junior
- Female is up +9% vs Mid-Year 2023.
 - The decrease in the number of Open Age women is as result of Women's Super League players now being counted within the professional rather than community reporting.

Age/Gender

- Primary Age girls is up 8% vs Mid-Year 2023
- Youth & Juniors Ages for both genders are up vs Mid-Year 2023
- Youth Age Girls are up 33% vs Mid-Year 2023

Overall: Up 1% vs mid-year 2023 in core community club settings

Inclusive Playing Offers

Core Indicators	Year 2 - 2022		Year 3 - 2022		Year 4 - 2024	
	Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	% Diff Aug to Aug
Physical Disability RL	153	155	247	263	218	-12%
Learning Disability RL	303	318	372	388	337	-9%
Wheelchair	236	269	427	467	473	11%
Totals	692	742	1,046	1,118	1,028	-2%

With the activity planned for the remainder of the season we expect participation levels across our Inclusive Playing Offers to be like last year. We are still witnessing encouraging growth across Wheelchair RL which we expect to continue. The refinement of the way we deliver LDRL and PDRL with a greater focus on more appropriate specialised offers has led to a flatlining in terms of growth as anticipated.

Brain Health

As part of the changes following the Brain Health Committee recommendations, there will be a mandated non-contact off-season commencing 18th November 2024 with a phased return to contact introduced from 13th January 2025. Full contact can resume no earlier than 10th February with matches next season scheduled no earlier than 22nd/23rd February. There should be no tackle training including the use of tackle shields or bags during the non-contact period. Touch RL and skills development will be allowed throughout, and we will be providing more detail and guidance documents in due course.

Work is ongoing with Leagues to refresh and maximize the playing calendar to ensure there is an appropriate mix of competitive games, differentiated playing opportunities, and appropriate focus on skill development.

The introduction of Touch or Tag at U6/U7 has been implemented and we are continuing to monitor the reduction of tackle height to armpit level across the wider game. Some of the recommendations were progressive and will continue to be rolled out through 2025 and 2026.

The changes implemented following the Brain Health Committee recommendations have not had any meaningful impact on participation.

A full list of the proposed modifications can be found [here](#).

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

Core Community

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

Participant Growth

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

Overall, we will be responsible for over 200+ events during 2024. Of these finals, 30+ will be showcase finals which means they will be appropriately resourced regarding staffing, media, medals, and venue dressing. We understand the difference enhanced events and finals, can have on the growth and development of our offers through providing aspirational playing opportunities,

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

2024 Men's Open-Age Competitions Overview

As the 2024 Rugby League season progresses, regional competitions are either concluding or preparing for their end-of-season, which will run from September into early October. Below is an overview of the current state of play and trends within the men's open-age competitions across various regions:

The total number of clubs and teams participating this year is consistent with 2023. However, participation levels have varied significantly by Competition.

The West of England region has seen a complete absence of open-age activity this season which is concerning. In the South West only one club participated, in friendly fixtures, highlighting a decline in structured competition. The London region has lost four teams compared to 2023, which could have implications for the longer-term sustainability of competitions in the area.



Despite these challenges, some competitions have experienced encouraging signs with teams that had previously been inactive for several seasons having returned. New clubs have entered competitions for the first time. Several teams have progressed from participating in merit-based offers in 2023 to competing in structured divisions in 2024 and some clubs have successfully entered second teams into competitions, showing growth within their ranks.

Overall, it is anticipated the number of male open age players is expected to fall slightly by the end of the season compared to 2023. Some leagues, such as the Midlands Men's League, Southern Conference League, and CARLA, have seen growth, though this is not the general trend.

Even in competitions where the number of teams and clubs has remained stable, many teams are operating with fewer players than in previous seasons.

The total number of games played is expected to be slightly less than in 2023. This is due in part to different competition structures, resulting in fewer structured divisions and a reduction in the number of teams involved in favour of more flexible, merit-style playing offers. Around half of the competitions report an increase in fixture completion rates.

Several finals have already taken place with many more scheduled through to the middle of October.

In July Eastern Rhinos A won the East Cup Final after defeating Bedford Tigers A 32-14 in the Final. The North West Men's League Cup Finals Day took place at Orrell St James on the 13th of July, Haydock Warriors won the Shield after beating Folly Lane A 14-12, Bank Quay Bulls lifted the Trophy after victory over Rochdale Mayfield A and Haresfinch lifted the Cup after overcoming hosts Orrell St James 16-6. The following weekend Batley Bulldogs hosted the Yorkshire Men's League Cup Finals Day. West Bowling A overcame Heworth A to lift the NCL Alliance Cup, Oulton Raiders A defeated York St John Barbarians 22-0 to win the Shield, Bramley Buffaloes defeated Illingworth 22-16 to lift the Trophy, and unfortunately the final game of the day, the Cup Final between Doncaster Toll Bar and Mirfield had to be called off early due to a player injury, this game has been rearranged for the 21st September.

In August Telford Raiders narrowly beat Nottingham Outlaws 28-24 to defend their Midlands Premier Division title. The following weekend Anglian Vipers won the East of England Premier Division title for the first-time overcoming Hemel Stags in the Final 50-10. On the last weekend of August, West Warriors A defeated Brixton Bulls 24-20 to win the London Men's Premier Division Final. The Yorkshire Men's League season will conclude on the 14th of September with four matches at Featherstone Rovers and the North West Men's League will conclude the last weekend of September with 5 matches across 2 days at Thatto Heath Crusaders. The NCL will host their finals day on the 5th of October at Featherstone Rovers.

This season saw the age in which a player can play Open Age increase from turning sixteen to being a True Age U17. There were under three hundred True Age U16 players involved in Open Age last season, with the number of True Age U17 players involved, as it stands, being almost identical year on year.

Having been considered for several years, The National Conference League introduced dual registration for the first time, with a good uptake. We currently have seventy-two dual registered players within the community game.

The number of discipline cases is expected to be lower than last season, assuming current trends continue. However, ongoing issues with touchline behaviour and match-day environments remain a concern.

Given the challenges observed in specific competitions, particularly the West of England, Southwest, and London, the RFL will continue to prioritize the men's open-age game, including the NCL, going forward. A comprehensive review of current competition structures and rules will be undertaken, with input from management groups, clubs, and players. The objective will be to identify and implement strategies to reverse declining participation trends and ensure the long-term sustainability and vitality of these competitions.

Growth Through Retention - Embed the ethos and principles of Player Development Leagues

The ongoing efforts to embed the ethos and principles of Player Development Leagues (PDLs) into the community game are crucial for fostering long-term growth through retention. The expansion of the Lions Development Programme (LDP) by Foundations and Clubs is a positive step, enabling more players to access different playing opportunities. However, to ensure sustained success, the current refresh and continuing rollout of the 2019 game-wide review is critical. This comprehensive project aims to enhance player retention by addressing key areas that influence the overall player experience and development.

Key Focus Areas for Improvement:

- **Competition:**
Refining competition structures to better align with player development needs and retention goals. This includes offering varied age-appropriate levels of competition that cater to different abilities, encourage continued participation, and attempt to reduce overcompetitive behaviours.
- **Governance:**
Strengthening governance frameworks to ensure that the community game is run effectively, with clear guidelines and policies that support player welfare and development.
- **Match Officials:**
Improving the recruitment, training, and retention of Match Officials to ensure that games are conducted fairly and professionally. Well-supported officials contribute to a positive playing environment, which is crucial for player retention.
- **Coaching:**
Enhancing coaching standards through ongoing training and development programs. Effective coaching is central to player development and enjoyment of the game, both of which are key factors in retaining players.
- **Adults (Volunteers and Parents):**
Engaging and educating volunteers and parents to create a supportive and positive environment around the game. Their involvement is essential for the smooth operation of the community game and for fostering a culture that encourages player retention.
- **Touchlines:**
Addressing touchline behaviours by promoting positive conduct among spectators and ensuring that match-day environments are welcoming and supportive for players of all ages.

Strengthening the Player Development Network:

The development of a robust network of player development staff via the LDP conferences is a strategic move that will facilitate the sharing of best practices and resources. This network will be instrumental in driving the changes outlined in the refresh project and ensuring that the ethos of Player Development Leagues is consistently applied across all levels of the game.

By focusing on these key areas and embedding the principles of PDLs, the community game can create an environment that not only attracts new players but also retains them, leading to sustained growth and the continued success of the Lions Development Programme.



England Community Lions

Aspirational playing opportunities including offering players an opportunity to represent their country continue to be a tool to aid retention.

The England Community Lions programme across various age groups led to extensive participation, rigorous trials, and competitive matches both domestically and internationally. It has engaged many participants through an extensive series of trials, training sessions, and competitive matches across multiple age groups. The programme has demonstrated strong performances, both domestically, particularly at the U16 and U19 levels. Undoubtedly the season's highlight was the performance of the U19's who retained the Euro U19 Championship in Serbia beating a strong French team who had beaten the England Academy team two weeks earlier.

Here is a breakdown of the key activities and outcomes for each age group:

U16 England Community Lions 2024

- Nominations and Trials:
 - 355 nominations received.
 - 4 regional trials held in Cumbria, London & South, North West & Yorkshire.
 - Final trials featured 60 players.
 - 8 training sessions conducted.
- Match Results:
 - June 1st: Scotland U16 4 - 46 England Lions U16 @ Cambuslang RFC, Glasgow.
 - June 29th: England Lions U16 44 - 10 Ireland U16 @ Ince Rose Bridge.
 - August 3rd: Wales U16 32 - 10 England Lions U16 @ The Gnoll, Swansea.
- Regional Matches:
 - July 7th: Lions Regional U16 14 - 22 Sud Provence @ Wigan St Pats.
 - July 11th: Lions Regional U16 12 - 22 Sud Provence @ Halton Farnworth Hornets.

U17 England Community Lions 2024

- Nominations and Trials:
 - 225 nominations received.
 - 4 regional trials held.
 - Final trials featured 60 players.
 - 7 training sessions conducted.
- International Matches in Nantes:
 - July 26th: France U17 40 - 0 England Lions U17.
 - July 29th: France U17 42 - 8 England Lions U17.

U18/19 England Community Lions 2023/24

- Nominations and Trials:
 - 300 nominations received.
 - 3 regional trials held.
 - Final trials featured 60 players.
 - 6 training sessions conducted.
- 2023 U18 Matches:
 - June 17th: England Lions U18 34 - 4 Scotland U18 @ Ashton Bears.
 - September 2nd: England Lions U18 24 - 26 Ireland U19 @ Golborne Parkside.
 - September 16th: England Lions U18 32 - 16 Wales U18 @ Leigh Miners Academy.

- 2023 U17 Matches:
July 15th: England Lions U17 - France U17 @ Victoria Park, Warrington.
July 19th: England Lions U17 20 - 36 France U17 @ Victoria Park, Warrington.
- 2023 U19 Matches:
November 4th: England Lions U19 18 - 10 Brazil Men XIII @ Pilkington Recs.
- 2024 U19 European Championship in Serbia:
Final Selection Trial: February 4th @ Pilkington Recs.
Training Sessions: four sessions before the championship.
Championship Matches:
July 14th: Serbia U21 4 - 52 England Lions U19.
July 17th (Semi-final): Ukraine 4 - 58 England Lions U19.
July 20th (Final): France 8 - 15 England Lions U19.

Men's England Community Lions 2023

- Nominations and Trials:
177 nominations received.
6 trials conducted, with players omitted after the first trial.
U23 squad selected from these trials.
- 2023 U23 Matches:
October 14th: England Lions U23 38 - 8 Wales Dragonhearts @ Pilkington Recs.
October 21st: Ireland A 6 - 44 England Lions U23 @ Morton Stadium.
October 28th: Wales Dragonhearts 8 - 52 England Lions U23 @ Trefelin Port Talbot.
- Final Trials:
February 4th, 2024: East vs West final trial match for U23 and Open Age players.
6 training sessions followed the final trial.
- 2024 Perth Australia Tour:
October 19th: Warm-up match against Emerging Western Australia.
October 24th & 29th: Two Test matches against Western Australia.
November 1st/3rd: Participation in Harmony 9's.

PDRL England Community Lions 2024

- Trials: Held for team selection.
Scheduled Matches:
August 31st: England PDRL 40 - 6 Wales PDRL @ Pontypool United RFC.
October 12th: England PDRL - Wales PDRL @ Salford City Roosters.

Social Rugby League

In 2024, the emphasis on social formats of Rugby League, like Tag Rugby, has grown significantly, reflecting the sport's commitment to providing inclusive and diverse playing opportunities. These formats allow players to enjoy the game and develop their skills while reducing the risk of injury, making Rugby League more accessible to a broader audience.



Tag Rugby League - The development of Tag Rugby League, driven by Try Tag Rugby (TTR), has seen substantial progress. The number of active participants in Tag Rugby League has reached 10,944 in 2024, with expectations of continued growth throughout the year. The London Tag Fest attracted 103 teams, the highest attendance since the event began, highlighting the increasing popularity of the format. A notable milestone was the trial of the first-ever Junior Tag Rugby League in Brighton, signalling a potential expansion of the sport to younger age groups.

The establishment of two new franchises in York and Newcastle demonstrates the geographical expansion of Tag Rugby. The takeover of the South Yorkshire TTR franchise by the Sheffield Eagles Foundation has also proved a success.

We are launching a Year 8 Tag Secondary Schools Event as part of our strategy to engage with schools, particularly in the Manchester area. The event is backed by "Team MCR," a local sports organization previously unaffiliated with rugby, marking a new venture in their sports calendar. Our partners Try Tag Rugby are supporting the initiative which will lead to greater youth engagement in Rugby League.



Touch Rugby League – The 2024 Foundation Touch Series, now in its second year, involved 20 Foundations offering various Touch Rugby League activities within their local communities. These activities included weekly evening sessions, events, and local leagues, providing opportunities for participants to engage in the sport. Despite a decrease in overall participation numbers there have been some successes including Leigh Leopards, who started their Touch Rugby programme from scratch. They now offer continuous weekly sessions throughout the year and are planning to introduce additional women-only sessions, demonstrating a commitment to inclusivity and community engagement.

The 2024 Premier Touch Rugby League has been expanded. The league has grown to include seven teams: Hull KR, Hull FC, Bradford, Leigh, Wakefield, Warrington, and Wigan. This growth has facilitated the transition of 70-80 players from their regional weekly sessions and leagues to competing in the Rugby Football League's elite touch competition. This expansion is a positive step towards strengthening the competitive landscape of Touch Rugby and providing players with opportunities to showcase their skills at a higher level.

Match Officials are crucial for maintaining the integrity and smooth operation of Touch Rugby events. In 2024, two Touch Match Officials courses were conducted, one online and one in-person in Hull. This development is essential for ensuring that a growing pool of qualified officials is available to support the expanding Touch Rugby activities, both at the grassroots and elite levels.

Masters RL – Once again there have been several positives from the season so far. Most notably the growth in Women’s Masters driven by Mina Patel and the wider Masters Management Group.

Participation has remained consistent with 2023, maintaining numbers above the 2,000 mark. The women’s section has experienced significant growth. The number of female participants has increased from 88 in 2023 to 156 in 2024, marking a substantial rise and highlighting the growing interest and involvement of women in Masters Rugby League.

The increased attendance of clubs at regional festivals in 2024 has been so significant that caps on the number of clubs able to attend were necessary. These caps ensure compliance with site safety regulations and guarantee sufficient playing time for all participants, reflecting the popularity and demand for these events.

The England Masters Lionhearts programme has been successfully reintroduced in 2024, with a planned tour to Belfast in November. Twenty players will be chosen to represent England at the international level. Selection criteria include appearances at Masters Festivals, shorts colour (indicating age and fitness level), and club affiliation, ensuring a diverse and deserving group of players represent the country.

Three stand-alone events have been dedicated solely to the Women’s Masters game, highlighting the sport’s commitment to fostering female participation. Additionally, a record number of six clubs are set to attend the Masters National Festival in September, further demonstrating the growth in this sector.

There are 139 qualified Masters Match Officials registered in 2024, with 85 attending training courses at various locations, including Bassetlaw, Brixton, Crosfields, Kippax, and Ossett. These courses included instruction on the updated Tackle Height Framework, ensuring that all officials are well-equipped to manage games according to the latest safety standards.



X-League – The 2024 season for X-League has seen notable developments, particularly in terms of player participation and the expansion of the league’s footprint. A total of 131 players are now registered across the nine existing X-League clubs, reflecting steady growth in this limited-contact variant of Rugby League. Grand Prix events have witnessed record attendance, showcasing the increasing popularity and engagement within the X-League community.

The introduction of the Rotherham Nomads as the latest addition to the X-League family has significantly contributed to the sport’s growth, adding thirty new players. This expansion highlights the format’s appeal and its potential for continued development. The league has effectively integrated Merit League fixtures, scheduling them around festival dates to maximize participation and ensure a competitive yet flexible playing environment for all involved.

The overall pool of officials remains small with the total number of qualified officials currently at 17. Due to the existing referees’ commitments in the full-contact community game and the limited availability of X-League-specific officials, the captain’s call rule is frequently utilized. This rule, which allows team captains to make certain on-field decisions, helps to manage the game effectively.

Increase the Number of Female Participants



Girls Growth Programmes

Futures

The 2024 Futures Programme focused on developing opportunities for girls in Rugby League across three key areas:

- U16 Training and Playing Offer in the South: Eight clubs participated, providing nine weeks of training and three festivals between April and July.
- U12 Development in Hull: These targeted girls that have come out of mixed Primary Rugby League, allowing them to stay engaged with the sport through development and community leagues.
- Targeted Clubs in the North West and Yorkshire: These clubs received support to create sustained opportunities for girls.

Feedback from participants is being collected to determine the next age groups to target in 2025. Reviews of these U12 initiatives will be conducted in September to assess their impact and sustainability.

RugBees

The RugBees programme, designed for girls aged 7-11, continues to grow, introducing young girls to Rugby League in a supportive environment. Foundations have integrated RugBees sessions into their Development Plans, leading to increased participation compared to 2023.

Warrington Wolves have led the way, with over eighty participants and a sustainable weekly programme. This has not only produced new players but also developed a new cohort of coaches and volunteers.

The RugBees programme is creating a pipeline of new players for community clubs, ensuring a smooth transition as they move into more competitive play.

Women's Rugby League

In 2024, the Women's Super League underwent a restructure to create four competitive and sustainable Championship leagues across the country:

- Northern and Southern Championships: These are played as traditional 13-a-side leagues.
- Midlands Championship: Operates as a festival-style competition with 9 or 11-a-side games.

End-of-season play-offs will determine the movement of teams between tiers. Fixture completion has been high, though the Southern Championship faced challenges, particularly with Bedford Tigers struggling to fulfil fixtures, prompting a potential restructure for 2025.

Participation in League 1, League 2, and Merit Leagues remains strong, with 1,575 participants, showing a slight increase from 2023. Despite challenges, the overall engagement has been positive, particularly in the Midlands and Southern regions, where fifteen clubs participated in various formats.

Girls Rugby League

The Girls League has seen a 22% increase in registered players to date, reaching 3,225 compared to 2,639 at the mid-season point of 2023. The number of games played has risen by 28.5%, with a fixture completion rate of 90%.

For the first time, an Under-18s league has been introduced, ensuring playing opportunities across all age groups from U11s to U18s. This marks a significant milestone in the development of girls' Rugby League, addressing previous gaps in the age group offerings.

The new Pathway to Performance (P2P) talent development programme targets U16s, with clubs signing a limited number of players aged 15 and 16. This pathway will continue into the U19s Academy system launching in 2025, with primary player registrations held by WSL teams and a full league format among participating clubs.

Responding to the growing demand for female-specific coaching development, a working group led by the RFL, is developing new CPD modules tailored to the female game. These modules will support new and aspiring coaches, enhancing their ability to develop female players effectively.

A new social media channel dedicated to women's Rugby League was launched on TikTok and Instagram in mid-2024. This platform covers grassroots and elite levels, with content created by players themselves, particularly at key points in the season. This initiative aims to increase visibility and engagement, further driving the growth of female participation in the sport.



Sustainable Community Game

Community clubs are crucial to the growth of Rugby League, and their sustainability is a key priority. Efforts are being made to support these clubs through various initiatives, partnerships, and targeted support.

Ongoing Club Health Checks and Development Plans are essential for clubs seeking funding, improving facilities, or increasing community involvement. These plans are regularly refreshed and updated with the help of volunteers.

Direct meetings with club leadership and committees have been conducted to understand their needs better and provide targeted support. In Leeds, Castleford, Warrington, and Wigan, there is a strong emphasis on supporting clubs that aim to expand Women's and Girls' activities. Clubs in lower socio-economic areas are receiving targeted assistance to ensure they can grow and develop. We continue to work collaboratively with Sport England, Buddle, Substance, and Continuum Leisure focusing on developing insights, data, and volunteer support.

Despite the challenging financial climate and high cost of living, community clubs are showing resilience. They continue to innovate and find ways to maximize their resources, ensuring they remain sustainable and effective in their communities.

Sport Governance and Administration

Community Board

The Community Board is a sub-committee of the RFL Board, tasked with overseeing the management and development of the community game. As the Community Game continues to evolve, the Community Board plays a critical role in ensuring that all aspects of the game are effectively managed and developed in line with the broader Community Strategy.

Recognizing the need for the Community Board to better represent the diverse facets of the game, an open and transparent recruitment process was conducted to bring in new members. This initiative was driven by the goal of aligning the Board's composition with the evolving needs and targets of the Community Strategy.

The newly formed Community Board includes individuals with a wide range of skills, knowledge, and experience. This diversity ensures that the Board is well-equipped to address the various aspects of the Community Game. The members bring expertise from several key areas, including:

Running community clubs, managing competitions, playing, officiating, coaching, and/or volunteering in disability sports and other settings of the Community Game and higher and further education settings.

For further details on the Community Board members please visit the RFL website. [HERE](#).

Community Game Environments

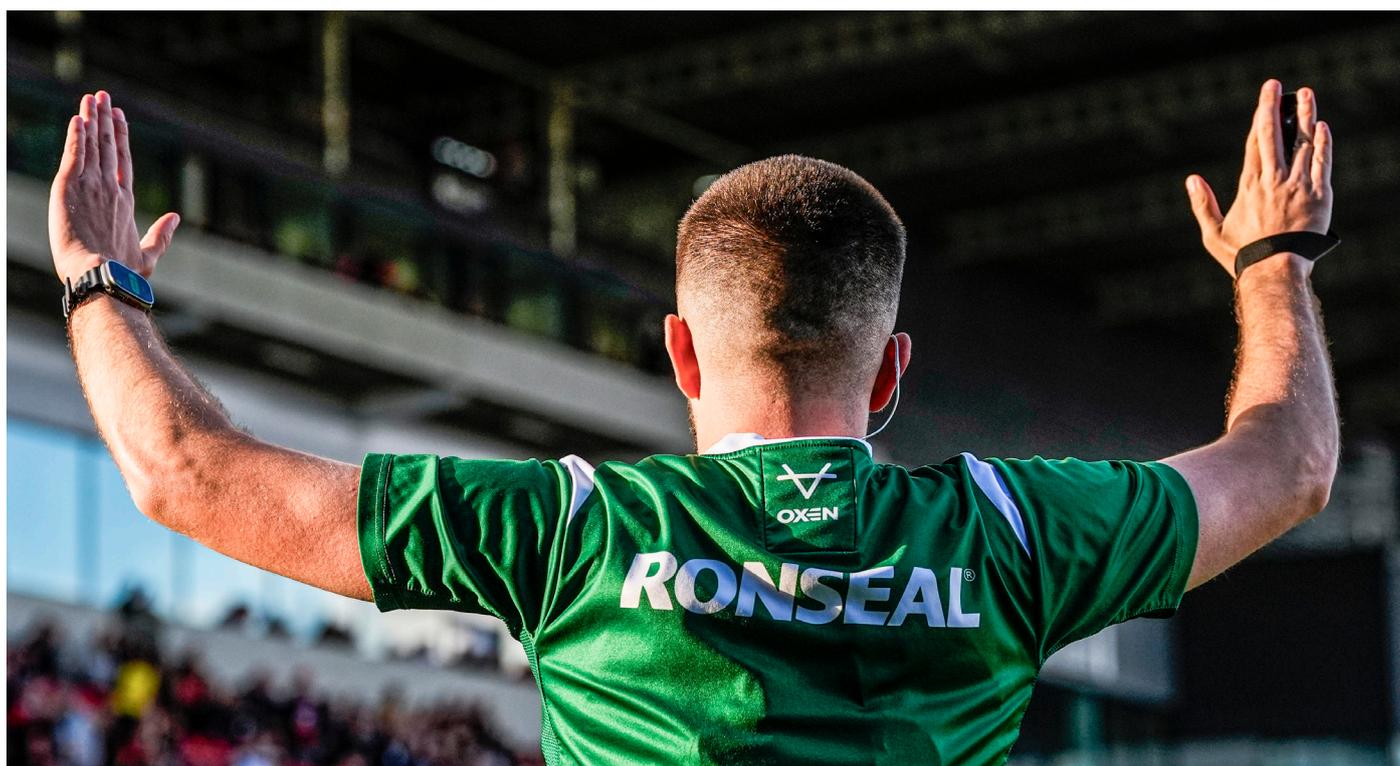
The “Enjoy the Game” initiative has been succeeded by the RESPECT campaign, marking a significant shift in Rugby League’s approach to fostering positive sporting environments and addressing anti-social behaviour within the sport.

Overview of the RESPECT Campaign

- **Scope:** The RESPECT campaign is a game-wide initiative that spans from grassroots community levels up to the Super League. Its primary focus is on promoting positive environments for all participants in Rugby League and combatting any forms of anti-social or discriminatory behaviours.
- **Objective:** The campaign aims to ensure that everyone involved in Rugby League, especially children and young people, have a positive and enjoyable experience. By promoting respect and good behaviour, the initiative seeks to create a more welcoming and supportive atmosphere throughout the sport.

The RESPECT campaign has set ambitious targets, in 2024, to reduce the following reported incidents by 10%:

- **Abuse of Match Officials:** Aiming to decrease the instances of abuse directed at referees and officials during community games.
- **Touchline Misbehaviour:** Reducing negative behaviours, such as aggressive or inappropriate conduct, by spectators on the sidelines at community games.
- **Coach Misbehaviour:** Addressing and minimizing instances of improper conduct by coaches at community games.
- **Player Misbehaviour:** Tackling misconduct by players at all levels of the sport, ensuring fair play and respect on the field.
- **Crowd Misbehaviour:** Aiming to curb inappropriate or disruptive behaviour by crowds at professional games, fostering a more family-friendly and respectful atmosphere.



Education

Education is a vital area in terms of attracting new participants and providing an opportunity to reach participants who may otherwise never get to experience the sport.

Schools

The 2023-24 school season was often weather disrupted, but with persistence from all delivery strands, regional and national activity was completed as planned after several rearranged events, comprising a total of 16,600 participants in local, regional, and national Champion Schools activity. Regional rounds culminated in Yorkshire finals at Featherstone Rovers RLFC, North West finals at Thatto Heath Crusaders, Cumbria at St Benedict's High School, North East at Kingston Park, and in London & South East at Hemel Stags. Participation numbers showed an increase from 2022-23, with the largest difference being an 18% rise in the number of girls participating in the competition.

There was a new venue for Champion Schools finals in 2024, moving from Kingston Park to the DIY Kitchens Stadium, Wakefield Trinity. Our first finals as always were in the Y11 competition, with both the boy's and girl's games contested between Castleford Academy (Wakefield) and St Peter's Catholic High School (Wigan). Despite much previous success in the boy's competition, this was the first time a girls' team from St Peter's had reached a final. This would be the only thing to celebrate on the day though as the Yorkshire team took both titles on the day.

The Y7 boys Champion Schools final once again graced the Wembley turf as the opening game of the Challenge Cup finals day in June, where St Peter's Catholic High School (Wigan) took on Ysgol Glantaf (Cardiff) in the Steven Mullaney Memorial game. On the day, the Wigan team who had looked ominous throughout the knockout stages proved too strong for their Welsh counterparts and took the title with a team of young stars including the sons of three former Super League players.

The remaining Champion Schools finals in early July returned to the DIY Kitchens Stadium, Wakefield Trinity. Seven games took place back-to-back in a great new setting, with the all-Hull Y8 girls final producing the game of the day in a back-and-forth battle. The Y8 boys' final produced the moment of the day however in the wholesome reaction of Outwood Academy Haydock player Sam and his team-mates to his POM award.

The 'Inspired By' 9s competition delivered by Foundations and strategic community club partners in the summer term for our emerging schools and players proved successful for us again in reaching new participants in and outside of core areas. Victoria Park hosted the North Finals, with the Southern Finals taking place at Hemel Stags. 500 additional participants competed in Inspired By 9s this year across the age groups, taking the total engaged to over 5500.

Male: College and University

College

The first final of the season was contested in the Premier play-off final in March, with the title retained by Castleford Tigers Development Academy who beat Salford Red Devils Development Academy at Leigh Miners' Sutton Park, a new venue which has served us well this season with its 4G surface, developed as part of the RLWC Created By funding.

The Cup was also retained by the same side this year; Carmel College (St Helens) kept the trophy for another 12 months after a fantastic final against Sigma College from Colchester. The game was the last of Clive Griffith's prodigious coaching career and a fitting end to his involvement in the game.

The South's County College 9s event took place for the second year, with an increase in participating teams from 3 to 5.

University

Northumbria 1s and 2s took both titles on offer in the men's BUCS competition in 2024, in addition to the 9s Championship and Trophy titles in another highly successful season for them. The men's competition will see some changes next year as from September 2024 top teams from across the country will compete in a National League consisting of six teams and participate in a single elite competition. The groundwork, proposals, and recruitment have been ongoing over the last 12 months by BUCS RL co-ordinator Maz Veater. The tiers underneath will remain the same as we continue to consolidate and grow the offer in the University space.

For further details please see [Rugby-League-Impact-Report-2023-24.pdf](#)

Delivery of the Introduction to Teaching Rugby League course continued throughout 2024 by RFL staff from Development and Performance. The course is delivered to ITE students completing postgraduate teaching qualifications, and therefore the next generation of the PE workforce in schools. Over 200 students received the training in the 23-24 academic year at 8 institutions, including new delivery at Brighton & Hove University and Chester.

Female: College and University

College

In its second full season, there was further improvement in the College competition for Girls. This was in the form of more festivals and an increased number of players and games. The season began with a coaching masterclass and festival at Cronton College to reignite player interest and educate some of the new players on the pathways available to them in the women's community game.

The final between Leeds Rhinos Development Academy and Halifax Panthers Academy took place alongside the Y11 Champion Schools and Boy's Cup finals at DIY Kitchens Stadium, Wakefield Trinity. The teams qualified by finishing in the top two in their regional groups at the end of the festival stages, followed by a semi-final tie which pitched the top team from Yorkshire against second place in North West, and vice versa. Leeds were comfortable winners in their first final, with a team containing several players who have since gone on to make their Women's Super League debuts for the Rhinos Women's first team.

University

The RFL-led Women's University season began with a 9s festival hosted by Loughborough University, attended by 6 teams. This was swiftly followed by a Forum at Leeds Beckett with access to England Women's Senior training session, a Q&A with Jodie Cunningham and Leah Burke, and a training session led by England women's coaching staff. Online coaching tutorials took place on either side of Christmas to support team coaches desiring CPD opportunities.

After 6 months of recruitment at the end of the 2022-23 academic year, the first-ever Women's University Winter League began in October and was contested over the winter by 6 teams: University of Manchester, University of Liverpool, University of Nottingham, Northumbria University, University of Oxford and Loughborough University. Teams, all played each other in a league format, followed by a play-off series at the end of the season in which the top 4 teams faced each other in the semi-finals. Northumbria University won the inaugural title at the play-off final, beating University of Liverpool in a close game at Featherstone Rovers in March, completing a treble of titles for the University across the men's and women's competitions.

Social Impact

Supporting our people and communities is a fundamental part of who we are contributing to our overall aim of being 'More than a Sport' and having a meaningful and measurable impact on improving people's lives by influencing wider social outcomes.

We want to positively influence the social mobility of our community using the power of Rugby League. We want long-term sustainability for Rugby League to continue to be the catalyst for generating positive effects on people and communities on and off the pitch. Supporting and growing our volunteer workforce and enhancing club facilities are both vital in creating a more sustainable environment.

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

We are also working to become more inclusive by expanding our disability offers, and more diverse by supporting our clubs to become more representative of the communities within which they are based.

To achieve the above aims our Social Impact team divides its work into three main areas, tackling inequalities, social justice and social cohesion.

Tackling Inequalities

We have recently confirmed an extension of our successful partnership with the Youth Endowment Fund, which will allow club foundations to reach more children and young people to steer them away from violence and crime. With £500,000 already invested in our Inspiring Futures programme by the YEF since 2019, we have now received an additional £582,000 taking the total investment in Inspiring Futures to almost £1.1m. Inspiring Futures is currently delivered by the charitable foundations of seven Super League clubs, supported by the RFL. The latest award will see another four foundations become involved.

We have also been working with our social care partner, Community Integrated Care to relaunch 'On the Same Team' helping tackle prejudice within society. The campaign offers simple and inspiring education that helps young people to understand the impact of their words and behaviours on other people and how we can thrive when we are 'on the same team.' For further information please visit <https://www.rugby-league.com/on-the-same-team>

Our Community Wellbeing Hubs (CWH) programme is an accreditation aimed to build stronger community clubs to enable them to play a greater role in delivering local social impact activities and providing an additional source of sustainability to the club. We continue to support existing community wellbeing hubs to further develop and share best practice across the network.

We have 7 CWH established so far and are working closely with a further 13 to launch. 2 of which will launch by the end of the year. We have also secured a sponsor for the programme, AXA XL. The sponsorship contributes to their accreditation plaque, launch day and training for CWH Volunteer lead.

Such programmes delivered through community clubs demonstrate the sports reach, relevance and are a crucial part of the sport's sustainable future.

Social Justice

Inclusive Playing Offers

Across the Inclusive forms of Rugby League which include Wheelchair RL, Physical Disability and Learning Disability RL there has been a significant shift in focus from mass participation to specialised appropriate participation. With a focus on performance and giving meaningful playing opportunities to defined disabled demographics this has led to a flatlining of participation across the board, but a steep increase in appropriate participants has been seen through other measures such as PDRL classification.

Wheelchair Rugby League, in 2024, has adopted a category system with 3 categories defining participation levels, Non-Disabled, Disabled and Disabled Performance Impaired. Whilst this system is self-certifying in nature, it focusses on ringfencing and safeguarding places on the field of play for those who have physical disabilities seen to impair the ability to perform Wheelchair Rugby League Skills. This model also continues to maintain playing opportunities for non-disabled and those disabled through societal definitions, the policy ensures the core demographic, physically disabled, are the focus in community settings.

Wheelchair RL has also seen a change in policy around junior participants and competitive adult environments with minimum age of participation increased to 16+. To support this in 2024 there has been a significant increase in junior specific playing opportunities centrally delivered and key events throughout the year. This has given more juniors meaningful, and importantly, safe spaces to play and compete in the sport.

Female focussed participation has also seen continued development with further opportunities to engage in women's only spaces whilst continuing to maintain women's participation in the traditional format of the sport. Additionally, there has been a proposed England Futures element added to the end of year internationals giving women and juniors a performance space in a bid to continue growth through aspirational playing offers.

PDRL has seen a seismic shift in policy with the introduction of minimum numbers of classified players in community settings. The PDRL footprint had grown to a place where there were 10 teams regularly participating in the domestic season, these teams were distributed between two divisions, strategically, based on previous seasons levels of competitiveness and the number of existing classified players in their player pools. The Premier Division of the sport then had competition rules introduced stating, to compete each team needs to always maintain a minimum of 4 classified players on the field, if these numbers cannot be met the game is forfeited. This policy was introduced to both promote classified participation and give the competition some validity on the disability sport landscape aiming to remove the level of impairment as the key factor for results. In the lower division these policies do not apply, allowing for the development of teams without the barrier of attaining minimum levels of classified participation.

LDRL has also added new levels of check and challenge through 2024 with regard to appropriate participation to the definitions to take part in the Community Integrated Care Learning Disability Super League. To support this the RFL alongside Community Integrated Care, have developed new robust training schedules as well as a suite of documents to inform and guide foundations when determining whether a participant is appropriate. This is done in a view to ensure the intended demographics have the most impactful experience whilst playing in the offer. It also allows those who would not be appropriate to be signposted to more appropriate impactful offers and ensures all players are in the best place to get the most out of the sport.

The Tryz programme developed with partners Access Sport, has continued to thrive, delivering in new locations throughout England, meaningful and impactful opportunities to juniors in a pan-disability model. This programme continues to operate as a fantastic signposting opportunity for young people with any disability to get into the sport of Rugby League.

We are also working to ensure that our community clubs become more representative of the communities within which they are based. This includes working with the Muslim Charter and BARA fostering engagement within the South Asian communities in Leeds, Bradford, Bolton, and Kirklees. This initiative focuses on increasing activity levels and participation

Social Cohesion

A well-motivated volunteer workforce is crucial to the long-term sustainability of every sport. Throughout 2024 we have seen 758 new volunteers register on GameDay. This marks the second consecutive year of growth with a total increase of 1574 volunteers registering since 2022. Whilst some of this increase will be because of existing volunteers registering for the first time, we are also witnessing an increase in the number of new volunteers to the sport. Efforts are ongoing to maintain this growth to alleviate the burden on existing volunteers and support the development of new teams, particularly in women's, girls, and disability RL.

Total Number of Volunteers Registered on GameDay

- 2022: 4,943
- 2023: 5,759 (16.5% increase)
- 2024: 6,517 (13% increase)

22-24 Difference: 32% increase in total registered volunteers.

Efforts were made post RLWC2021 to build on the interest in volunteering at major events through transitioning volunteers permanently into the sport and provide ongoing opportunities. Instrumental in this work has been the introduction of a Volunteer Portal, matching volunteers with volunteering opportunities and the creation of a new central volunteer workforce branded with kit as 'Try Force.' 91 new volunteers joined the Try Force Team in 2024 bringing the total to 450. To date 24 development and community events have been supported with 350 volunteer hours contributed. There are plans to increase volunteer involvement for 2025 events by leveraging the established brand and increasing volunteer recognition.

More widely, we have increased volunteer recognition through rewards and awards. Through a partnership with Tempo Time, volunteers can redeem their volunteer hours for rewards including rugby league tickets. We have reintroduced Community Volunteer Awards and Service to Rugby League Awards. The most recent recipient of the Service to Rugby League Awards was Michael Turner from West Yorkshire who has served the community game in a variety of different roles across 5 decades.

A new initiative is underway in collaboration with Greater Manchester Moving and three community clubs to test if using free development opportunities can replicate the success seen in larger events. This project is expected to conclude by March 2025.

Good facilities are key to increasing participation and drive long term sustainability in the sport. Several initiatives are underway to enhance Rugby League facilities and support community engagement in the sport. The Rugby League National Community Facilities Strategy has been published, detailing strategic priorities and necessary investments to support the community game up to 2030.

Initiatives include:

- **3G Facilities:**
Rugby League is involved in 22 operational 3G facilities across the country, with an additional 3 facilities planned.
- **Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund:**
Over 60 projects have received funding through the Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund, aimed at improving pitch quality for community clubs and foundations.
- **Capital Works for Grass Pitch Drainage:**
Two clubs have initiated capital works to enhance grass pitch drainage, supported by the Football Foundation's Multi-Sport Pitch Improvement Fund.
- **PlayZone Projects:**
Rugby League is participating in PlayZone projects in strategically important areas, collaborating with activation partners to maximize the facilities' use for the sport.
- **Grant Funding for Club Improvements:**
Ongoing collaboration with community clubs has secured additional grant funding to undertake capital improvement projects at various club sites.
- **PitchPower Database and Grass Pitch Assessments:**
Efforts continue to enrol more community clubs into the PitchPower database, which monitors grass pitch conditions. The goal is to conduct 500 PitchPower assessments in the financial year 2024/25.



Mason

ADVANCED STEEL SERVICES

Moody

THUNDER

tyne metropolitan college

Community Development Centre

Sondico