

# Community Rugby League MORE THAN A SPORT REVIEW 2022



## Executive Summary

- The sport has not bounced back as strongly as the mid-year participant reporting figures suggested it would particularly male open age.
- We are continuing to see accelerated growth amongst the numbers of women and girls playing rugby league.
- Expansion of girl's Futures Hubs continues and piloting of new girls 7-11's programme is underway.
- Continued expansion and broadcast coverage of Women's Super League and increased regional activity.
- Culture change and improvement in touchline environments remain a priority.
- Ongoing delivery of a comprehensive coach education programme.
- We continue to monitor and adapt our playing offers to ensure they are fit for purpose post pandemic.
- Analysis of data and introduction of new programmes designed to address the retention and transition challenges particularly between youth and open age.
- Match official abuse continues to be a barrier to retention with the introduction of headcams a proactive step to improving environments.
- Work ongoing to improve conversion rates from those taking a refereeing course to officiating in a community setting.
- Maintaining strong relationships with professional club foundations remains fundamental to our ability to deliver growth across all settings.
- Progress in establishing Player Development League ethos and principles within existing junior leagues via Lions Development Programme.
- On field success for England Community Lions with the U19's successful in the European Championship and PDRL team winning the inaugural PDRL World Cup.
- Work continues to support community clubs achieve good governance.
- Successful launch of our participant membership scheme 'Our League Active'
- Positive partnership with Try Tag Rugby continues encouraging more participants to try social versions of the sport.
- Cautious return to activity following the pandemic across educational settings.
- Over 4,500 participants took part in localised 9's activity targeting schools new to rugby league including a new tournament for girls years 7 and 8.
- Specific Rugby League Coordinator employed for the first time by British Universities and Colleges.
- Our Inclusion rugby league offers Learning Disability RL, Physical Disability RL and Wheelchair RL continue to see significant growth.
- We have secured supported and administered five significant grant funding schemes delivering substantial investment into the community game.
- Piloted five community wellbeing hubs as part of a project to recognise the role rugby league club's play at the heart of communities.
- Strong ongoing partnerships with Community Integrated Care, Street Games and Access Sport.
- Development of new RFL Facilities Strategy underway.

## Introduction

Welcome to the latest Community Rugby League More Than a Sport Update. This update summarises the activity undertaken by the Development Team and the Community Game Delivery Team contributing to the RFL Strategy and Vision 2022-2030.

In addition to covering activity since the last update was published at the end of August 2022 this update will also review the year as a whole.

### Participant reporting

We report to Sport England twice yearly on numbers of active participants. This reporting takes place at the end of August and the end of December each year. The mid-year reporting in August focuses on the numbers of our participants in core community club settings with other settings such as education and social activity reported in full at the end of each year, together with final core community numbers.

Activity within education settings such as schools, colleges and universities takes place within academic years. The education activity reported at the end of 2022 will be activity that took place between the start of the autumn term in 2021 continuing through until the end of the summer term in 2022.

The graphic below illustrates the periods and settings which our reporting covers:-

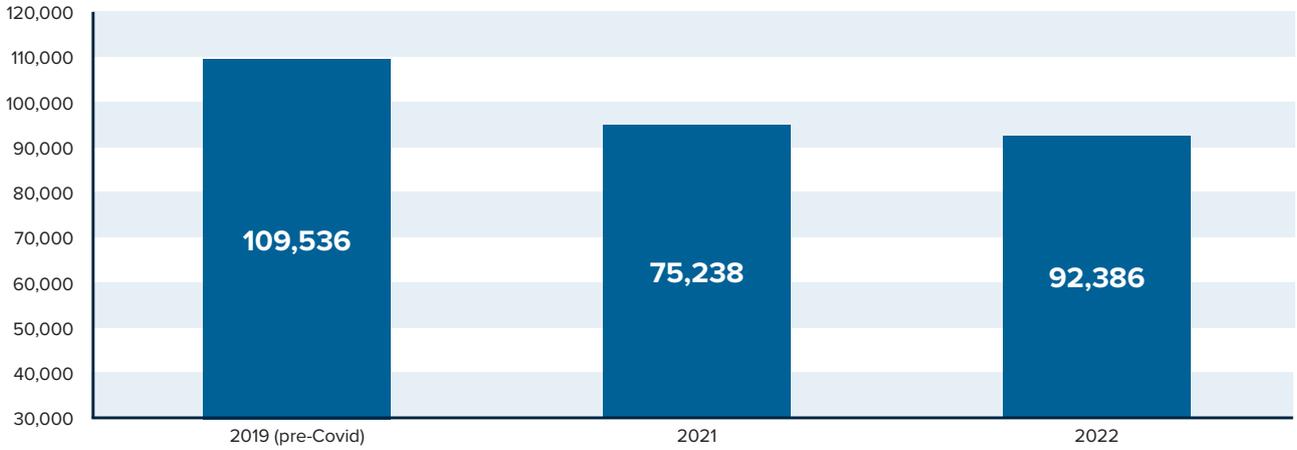


There were genuine fears during the early stages of the pandemic that sports could see a collapse in participation numbers. The mid-year reporting summarised in the August More Than a Sport Update gave some comfort that this would not be the case in Rugby League and the key indicators at that time suggested the sport had bounced back strongly, particularly within the younger age groups. We were also continuing to see strong growth in the women and girl's game.

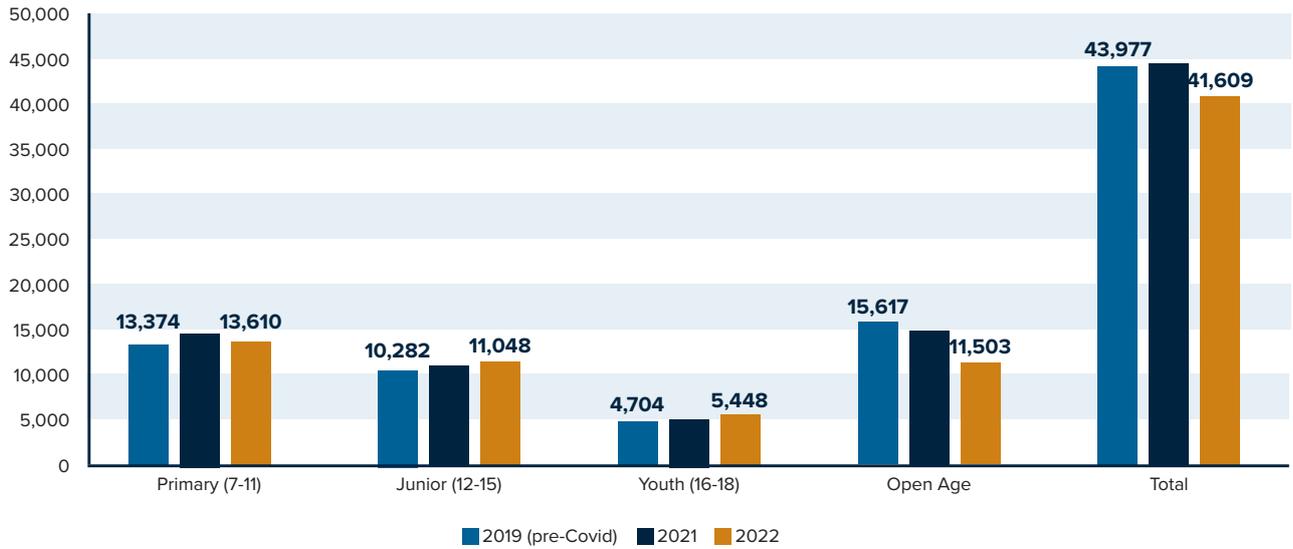
The early optimism outlined in the mid-season reporting has been tempered to a degree by the final year end reporting. Whilst the picture is not as bad as feared during the pandemic, the sport has not bounced back quite as strongly as the mid-year reporting indicated it would. This is particularly the case at open age.



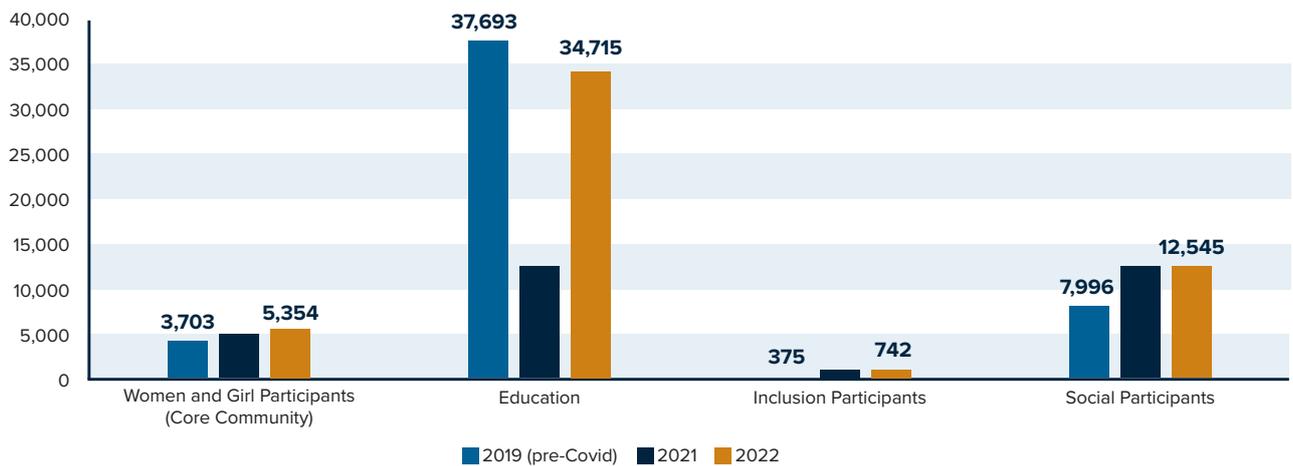
## Active Participants



## Core Community



## Wider Community Game



## 2022 Participant Reporting Summary

<b>Active Participants</b>	2019 (pre-Covid)	2021	2022
	<b>109,536</b>	<b>75,238</b>	<b>92,386</b>
<b>Core Community</b>	2019	2021	2022
Primary (7-11)	13,374	14,282	13,610
Junior (12-15)	10,282	10,877	11,048
Youth (16-18)	4,704	4,821	5,448
Open Age	15,617	14,162	11,503
<b>Total</b>	<b>43,977</b>	<b>44,142</b>	<b>41,609</b>
<b>Women &amp; Girl Participants (core community)</b>	2019	2021	2022
	<b>3,703</b>	<b>4,919</b>	<b>5,354</b>
<b>Education Participants</b>	2019	2021	2022
	<b>37,693</b>	<b>13,126</b>	<b>34,715</b>
<b>Inclusion Participants</b>	2019	2021	2022
	<b>375</b>	<b>609</b>	<b>742</b>
<b>Social Participants</b>	2019	2021	2022
	<b>7,996</b>	<b>12,465</b>	<b>12,545</b>

The numbers of active participants in our primary, junior and youth settings was higher in 2022 than in 2019 pre Covid.

Active participants in our youngest age groups (under 7 to under 11) were less in 2022 when compared to 2021. Open age registrations are significantly down in 2022 when compared to 2021. The combined effect is that the active numbers of players in our core community club settings are down compared to both 2019 pre-Covid and 2021.

Education settings returned in full post-Covid in September 2021. There was still some trepidation around ongoing risk of infection, new strains, and the need for students to catch up on lost learning time following continued disruption to their education the previous year. This meant lower than usual participation rates across all three education settings at the initial stage of return to play during the autumn.

Social participation has returned to pre-pandemic levels driven by the continued growth of Try Tag Rugby and an increase in the numbers of Master's players.

***The decline in numbers of open age participants together with the more cautious return in education settings are the main contributory factors limiting a full return to pre-pandemic levels of activity.***

There are other considerations affecting the numbers of active participants. The loss of Sky Try funding has affected all Foundations, although some have succeeded in replacing Sky Try with paid-for provision. However, the overall effect is less schools' activity both in primary and secondary school settings.

We have seen significant regional variation. For example, the London Junior League is down by 383 registrations between 2021 and 2022. North East Rugby League has seen the numbers of registrations reduced by 542 across the game. These figures indicate that areas outside of what have been traditionally considered as Rugby League heartlands have been impacted more by Covid than other areas.

We also witnessed a decrease in the numbers of participants registering after the summer break. This figure was down 835 compared to the previous year. The earlier finish of some activity ahead of the RLWC2021 may well be a contributory factor as may be the no pro-rata of Our League Active membership.

The challenges around open age activity levels are not unique to Rugby League but require specific interventions. The challenges have been compounded by bouncing from a pandemic to a cost-of-living crisis. Other relevant factors may include participants only registering as and when they play rather than at the start of the season. Given the cost-of-living crisis we also have to factor in that participants have other priorities including the need to work more at weekends.

The loss of youth players transitioning from youth to open age settings during the pandemic may also be having an impact.

In order to improve the numbers of active participants at open age levels a mixture of short-term interventions and longer-term solutions are required. Discussions and plans with individual leagues ahead of the 2023 season have taken place and we are working with leagues to ensure competition offers are right, for example meaningful activity to encourage a return after the summer break.

Longer term it is vital we deliver all the outcomes set out in the 'Your Game Your Say' Game Wide Review which was published in 2019.



There has also been understandable focus throughout the year on Head Impact given the importance of player welfare and the advances in medical, research and technology. There is also the well-publicised ongoing Legal Claim from former players to note. Concussion in sport represents a significant risk to all contact sports including Rugby League. It is a whole game issue affecting both the professional and community game. The game cannot operate without appropriate insurance and premiums have increased significantly.

A significant amount of work is ongoing to mitigate risk, protect players and give the necessary assurances to insurers. Our approach is focussed on: -

- Ongoing medical research
- Providing the correct education and information to players and volunteers of potential risks
- Changing attitudes and behaviours in this space
- Effectively enforcing existing regulations aimed at protecting players
- Implementing technology and research driven innovative measures

The RFL as the National Governing Body and Community Clubs have a duty of care to all participants and everyone can help influence change and address the level of risk. Rugby League is a physical game however, encouraging a safe environment on and off the field can assist in reducing the level of risk of a concussive event.

Law modification trials are taking place and we will continue to be guided by the medical and research expertise that exists within the game to consider what changes may be required to rules, regulations, protocols and playing calendar to safeguard players and the future of the game.

## Community Strategy & Vision 2022-2030

The community strategy is available on the RFL website and can be found here

This includes a focus on three key areas: -

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

A full development and community game delivery team organogram was provided in the August 2022 update. At that time one vacancy was still to be confirmed. We are delighted to report that Tom Little has now joined the RFL as Facilities Manager.

## Core Community

The Community Game provides the Foundation on which the sport is built. Our priorities are to ensure growth by ensuring the sport is sustainable, offer targeted growth initiatives and provide appropriate and flexible playing opportunities.

***Player retention is key to our ability to grow. To achieve this our ambition is to deliver culture change, improve our environments, and ensuring we are player centred.***

A full summary of the various initiatives in place to deliver the culture change necessary to impact behaviours was set out in the previous update which can be found here



Despite the various initiatives, unacceptable behaviours both on and off the field continue to impact on our ability to retain participants including players and match officials. The Community Board received a presentation from leading match official Liam Moore during the meeting which took place on 30th November 2022. It became abundantly clear during that presentation that match officials (including many under the age of 18) are still being subject to unacceptable abuse. Wider disciplinary cases also continue to evidence unacceptable levels of behaviour.

Ensuring clubs take ownership of touchlines and improve behaviours is a key priority for 2023. Working with key stakeholders, the RFL will introduce whatever steps are necessary in addition to those initiatives already underway, to improve environments.

## Coaches

Coach education and development is an integral part of delivering our strategic objectives. We need to give coaches the right tools to create a safe and welcoming environment for players to learn and develop through Rugby League.

***Coach development is a key part of attracting and retaining more and better quality players, and helps retain coaches within the game.***

Below is a summary of work undertaken supporting the education and development of coaches.

### Coach registrations

During 2022 3,362 coaches registered.

### Coach education programme

We continue to provide a comprehensive coach education programme providing Level One and Level Two courses across the community game. During 2022 577 booked on the Level One and Two courses which ran.

A Working Group has been set up to review the Level 2 Coaching Qualification. Accessing a suitable course in terms of the requirement for face-to-face learning can be challenging particularly in areas outside of the traditional heartlands. Work is ongoing to find a solution to these issues.

RLWC2021 Inspired By funding will continue to subsidise coach education courses until March 2023.

## Women's Leadership and Performance Coach Development Programme

11 coaches have committed to the programme and have attended 2 workshops. The first was held at our Etihad offices during the summer and the second during November at the University of York. This included the opportunity to attend the RLWC2021 double header featuring New Zealand versus Cook Islands and Australia versus France. A further two workshops are planned for 2023.

## Primary Rugby League (PRL)

Primary Rugby League coach workshops will once again be delivered across the community game in 2023 by club foundations. A moderation day was held in December to upskill Foundation staff delivering the workshop with 13 members of staff from 6 foundations attending the training. The next batch of PRL workshops will be delivered across the community game between February and April 2023.

New coaches' handbooks will be circulated to all registered coaches at U6 to U11 prior to the 2023 season commencing. Parents Information Sheets will also be circulated.

## Coaching Masterclasses

Working alongside colleagues from RLWC2021 the Development Team organised a series of coaching masterclasses to provide access for community coaches to the international coaches during the RLWC2021. This included the opportunity to observe international coaches delivering activity and taking part in Q&A sessions. International coaches taking part included Kristian Woolf (Tonga Men), Paul Anderson (England men) and Tom Coyd (England wheelchair).

## Target Growth Initiatives

Development Plans agreed with the Foundations linked to many of our professional clubs are key in supporting and delivering our Target Growth Initiatives. In 2022 numerous Foundations supported delivery of Player Development League activity in Manchester and West of England. The Foundations linked to the 2 Hull clubs are also key delivery partners in embedding Player Development League principles in Hull. As was previously the case with the England Talent Pathway, Foundations will also be key in supporting delivery of its successor, the Lions Development Programme.

In terms of 2023 Target Growth Initiatives, we have been working with the Foundations on new Development Plans to ensure we are all working together to deliver key growth initiatives for 2023 which include a new girls U7-U11's programme, Inclusion sport specific development plans designed to maximise the impact of the RLWC2021 and new Touch RL initiatives.

## Player Development Leagues (PDL)

Greater Manchester RL: 5 festivals have taken place in 2022, with between 100 and 200 players participating at each. In total there are 121 players registered.

Midlands: Player Development Festivals are going well, with over 200 players playing at each. Festivals have taken place across the region from Shrewsbury to Sherwood, and over 600 players are registered to clubs in the league.

West of England: All Golds are taking a development lead in the region and junior development games took place across the summer. Cheltenham Phoenix and All Golds have played their first ever junior games in 2022, West Oxford Levellers continue to grow, and Swindon St George have also been involved in activity.

A meeting in early 2023 will help shape the future activity as we look to build upon 2022 and look to deliver in new regions.

In terms of embedding Player Development principles within existing competition framework the City of Hull and North East continue to lead the way in this regard.

We have successfully piloted in 2022 a new player and coach development programme which will see a new player development offer. This will be non-competitive and help significantly towards embedding player development principles which go a long way towards addressing the key recommendations from the Whole Game Review. This would see more people viewing the PDL principles in action.



**Mako**  
**Bay Rovers Ladies**  
**KOSPORT**  
WE MAKE PEOPLE STRONGER

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The new programme will launch in 2023 at U12 and U13 ages, it will be called the Lions Development Programme (LDP), which is the new name for the England Talent Pathway (ETP).

Providing appropriate playing opportunities is crucial to attract and retain players. We look at doing this is through:-

### **Customer Centric Competitions**

The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on competition delivery, and we are now seeing the impact of this in the open age game. We continued to monitor our playing offers and sought out feedback from Clubs as we progressed through the season to ensure our initial playing offers continued to be fit for purpose. In addition to that, the impact of the cost-of-living crisis is potentially more detrimental than the pandemic. There was significant financial support during Covid with a lot of our Clubs being able to mothball, however activity has recommenced, and the costs are now far more significant for example, training, travelling, and fuel.

As in previous years we conducted end of season reviews for all our competitions. We used registration data and match statistics (including completion rates) to review against previous seasons. The key challenges identified were:

- A concerning reduction in fixture completion, given the impact of Covid and when compared to last season, this has reduced significantly. Several teams did struggle to fulfil games on a regular basis and generally the number of teams withdrawing during the season was far too high.
- Second teams had poor fixture completion this year. This was also evident last season, highlighting that Clubs are continuing to struggle raising more than one team on any given weekend.
- Late call offs were a particular frustration highlighted in the player survey, as understandably it becomes difficult to find alternative opposition on short notice.
- A common concern raised, which was also highlighted in the player survey, was second teams using a disproportionate number of first team players, which had a negative impact on competition integrity.
- The standard of officiating is a common criticism by clubs, however without an increase in the number of Match Officials we are not able to be critical of the standard.

The respective Management Groups were presented with the data and came up with the following suggestions, that we will look to incorporate into all our Competitions next season:

- Introduction of more robust entry criteria in 2023 considering the fixture completion of teams in 2022. Teams that have struggled/withdrawn should only be accepted into the Merit League to prove they can fulfil fixtures regularly. The medium to long term goal would be to ensure only those willing and able to complete all scheduled fixtures are entered into a structured division. If Management Groups are tougher on who they allow in, the number of teams in the Merit League would grow because of this, and teams placed in the Merit League should have plenty of options when it comes to arranging fixtures.
- Introduction of stricter Competition Rules that would allow Management Groups to remove teams from a structured division earlier if they are not completing games.
- Consider an increase in the sanctions to act as a deterrent for calling games off.
- A recruitment drive for Match Officials is essential. It is prohibitive to the growth of the Competition if the current number of Match Officials regularly available is less than the number of games scheduled.
- Consider regional playing offers where possible to reduce the amount of travel required.

- The issue of players of first team ability playing in second team fixtures is an issue that has been mentioned every season. This can have a negative impact on Competition integrity. We need to look to address this either structurally, by separating second teams into their own divisions, by introducing some sort of rulings that would prevent this from happening, or a combination of the two.

The challenges and potential solutions were discussed at post-season Club meetings, and following those a survey was carried out to seek feedback on the appropriate competition structures and potential rule changes. For 2023 the aim for all competitions will be to increase fixture completion and the number of fixtures that take place. We have started the application process for all Member League competitions earlier than usual, with entries set to close early in the New Year. Following that meetings will be held with Management Groups and Clubs to discuss and agree structures and calendars for 2023.

The Southern Competitions will now be supported by the Southern Competition Group who will provide support to the RFL to grow and develop Rugby League Competitions across the South of the country. The group exists to facilitate cooperation and coordinate effort amongst all competitions in the South, in line with the RFL's Community Strategy and Vision for the future. It's aims are to help implement and manage sustainable strategy as directed by the RFL and the Southern Regional Development Forum.

***Continuing the celebrated growth in the number of women and girls playing Rugby League remains a priority.***

#### ***Update on women and girls competitions***

As expected, we have again seen an increase in the numbers of players registered across both the Women's and Girls Leagues.

Recently we announced the next phase of our Women and Girls' strategy which started in 2017, using brand extension in the form of a Women's Super League as the catalyst to grow Women's and Girls' Rugby League across the whole of the UK. The announcement formally introduced the structure from 2024, which takes the form of a national pyramid and integrates the wider regional strategy into that pyramid.

The national pyramid in 2024 will consist of a Tier 1 8 team Women's Super League and in Tier 2, 3 new regional leagues to compliment the Championship competition across Lancashire and Yorkshire (Roses).

The 3 additional regions are South (already set up via the Women's Super League South), a new Midlands competition, and a Northern competition, which will incorporate West Cumbria, North East and Scotland.

The leagues were all delivered successfully with excellent fixture completion rates.

The Championship and League One Grand Finals took place on Sunday 2nd October at Odsal Stadium, Bradford. Oulton Raidettes won the Championship Grand Final with Sheffield Eagles taking the League 1 Title.

Oulton declined the opportunity to move to WSL so Salford were offered and accepted that spot. Wakefield Trinity were relegated.

We finished the season with 1690 players registered, an increase of 170 from 2021. In all 319 games took place, showing an increase of 70 on the last full season which was in 2019.



## Girls RL

The Girls game has continued its growth in 2022. We finished the season with 2415 players registered. The table below demonstrated the positive improvement across several metrics.

Year on Year Comparison	Participants	Games Played	Cancelled	Team Sheet Completion
2022	2,415	735	154	96%
2021	2,186	463	107	91%
2019	1,642	598	115	92%
2018	1,329	405	88	62%
2017	895	199	23	

The U16's Premier Division concluded on 17th July when Oulton Raidettes beat Leigh Miners Rangers in Golden point extra time, a game played at the fantastic LNER Stadium in York.

In the U16's Premier Division 60 out of 63 scheduled games took place. This would compare favourably with any of the boys' divisions at this age group.

The remaining divisions all completed their seasons with high completion rates. The overall figure was affected by some cross association games which we put in the calendar as loop fixtures, however as these involved some cross Pennine travel and were essentially friendlies then a number of these games did not go ahead (the games also coincided with the peak of fuel prices in the summer); we will not include these games in the 2023 calendar.

Another huge positive was the discipline and spirit in which the games were played in, across the whole season we only had 10 discipline cases from 735 games.

The finals days in October took place at Featherstone Rovers and were streamed live on the OurLeague App.

## Growth Programmes

The Futures Hubs were created to support the birth of new localised competition, to support future growth and add sustainability to the WSL team within the region. In 2022 where six U16s hubs were targeted, over 120 girls were engaged in the programme which included intra-hub playing opportunities as well as a showpiece inter-hub game between Newcastle and West Cumbria hubs played as a curtain raiser for a Championship game.

Next year in line with our plan we've introduced an additional age group with hubs delivering U16s and U14s or U15s and U13s depending on geographical location and demands of the area. We are looking to introduce between 10 and 14 Futures Hubs in 2023, building on the successful pilot in 2022.

In 2022 we piloted G.I.R.L ('Girls into Rugby League') with Warrington Wolves Foundation with the aim of offering alternative provision for girls aged 7 to 11 to help address higher dropout rates at this age group, and less proportionate take up in comparison to other ages groups. Following consultation and piloting G.I.R.L, we will look to introduce a new girls 7 – 11's programme in 2023, bringing this forward in our plans to support the accelerated growth following the RLWC2021.

The programme will be delivered via Foundations in the first instance with 20+ showing interest, with a strong focus on sustainability and branding. This programme creates the first entry point for participants, with the aim of sign posting players on to local community mixed or girls teams.



**rugbee**  
RUGBY LEAGUE

## Women's Super League

2022 saw the best year to date regarding Women's Super League, with 5 games covered by Sky. In 2023 several teams have announced enhanced support and provision to their players, increasing the standard and attracting more players to the sport. Sky Sports have announced the coverage of 6 games this year: 3 league fixtures, both semi-final's and the final. The league will reduce to 8 teams in 2024, with the 6 teams in Group 1 moving into the competition and 2 teams from Group 2 competing for the final 2 spots. The remaining 4 teams will drop into the Championship competition which has grown to 10 teams to accommodate.

## Challenge Cup

The Challenge Cup introduced a new format of group games in 2022 to support the regional growth strategy and bring in more meaningful opportunities for teams to compete against each other. The Challenge Cup final took place at Elland Road in front of a record crowd. The competition in 2023 will continue in the same format, which will include London Broncos and Cardiff Demons from WSL South and Oulton Raidettes and Hull KR from the Championship featuring alongside the 12 teams from WSL. The final will be staged at Wembley for the first time alongside the men's Challenge Cup final.

## College and University

We've placed a renewed focus on Women's opportunities in colleges and university, which has seen a Girl's college competition contested for the first time. The inaugural final will take place at Featherstone Rovers alongside the boy's College Cup Final and Y11 Champion Schools finals in April, with 6 teams still in the running to earn their spot in the semi finals at the remaining national festival on 8th March.

In University settings, following the introduction of a BUCS Rugby League coordinator, we have delivered several development days to engage and grow Women's Rugby League in this sector, which should lead to an official competition.

***Ensuring players have access to appropriate playing opportunities through improved player engagement and development helps improve transition rates and attract new participants.***

The Player Development Group is continuing to drive cross-departmental work to establish a more connected approach for the game via Coaching, Development, Operations and Performance.

The focus is collaborating on key interventions across the strategies of each department linked to the Sport England and Community Game strategies 2022 to 2030 and Whole Game Review, with the aim to deliver the Player Development Framework.

Work to integrate established Player Development League ethos and principles within existing junior leagues continues via the Lions Development Programme pilots.

Retention and transition, particularly youth to open age transition, is a significant challenge facing the game. Significant research has been undertaken to establish retention rates throughout the game on an age, gender and league basis. The reality is we lose more players than we keep at under 16 and under 18 male age groups. It is vital we understand why players leave (and why they join) and differences in regions and between genders. Whilst the Lions Development Programme and England Community Lions are examples of programmes designed to improve transition, much more needs to be done. This includes revisiting key issues set out in the Whole Game Review including investigating the potential to trial other age groups and review of playing calendars.



## England Community Lions

The 2022 season consisted of some exhilarating successes and incredible sorrow. The U19's returned from Italy in September as European champions but without assistant coach Gary McMahon who sadly passed away during the tournament. The loss felt by the U19's players and staff was compounded by the passing away of much loved player Logan Holgate early in 2023.

Further success came in the inaugural PDRL World Cup which formed part of the RLWC2021 Festival of World Cups which saw the Lions overcome New Zealand in the final at the Halliwell Jones Stadium, Warrington.

The key objectives of the programme are to provide aspirational playing opportunities for players and provide development opportunities for coaches from across the sport. Competing in and winning the European Championships and World Cup has provided some of our Lions with experiences they will remember for the rest of their lives. Trips to France for U17's provided similar memories.

The Lions programme has evolved into a 12 month a year operation which requires a huge commitment from the volunteers involved. The programme now consists of 10 teams led by volunteers who cover the various roles.

## Social Rugby League Update

We recognise that not everyone wants to play the full contact version of our sport. Flexible ways to play provide customer choice, increased retention, transition offers, and support equality. Increasing numbers of participants through evolving non and limited contact Rugby League offers including Touch RL, Tag RL, X-League and Masters RL remains a priority.

## Try Tag Rugby

The positive working relationship between TTR and the RFL was ever-present throughout 2022 with approximately 10,000 players participating in leagues and national events. Over 15,000 games of Tag Rugby were held in the U.K in 2022, operating in 15 different locations; Bradford, Bristol, Coventry, Edinburgh, Leamington Spa, Leeds, Leigh, London, Manchester, Oxford, Reading, Salford, Sheffield, Wigan, Wakefield. Edinburgh and Leigh were new locations for this format of the game. This included the largest single venue adult Tag Rugby event in the northern hemisphere attended by approximately 1,300 players. With 112 players attending the Rugby League World Cup Semi-Final & 112 players attending the Super League Grand Final.

## Touch RL

The Foundation Touch Series which took place in 2022 provided the RFL with essential feedback which has shaped the 2023 Touch RL programme. This included removing barriers to participation and creating sustainable opportunities through sessions, events and leagues which were hosted throughout the year. In addition to community clubs, Foundations delivered social Touch RL programmes and the Foundation Touch Series. A partnership with England Touch Association included workshop support and the opportunity for players to transition easily between the ETA Competitions and RFL Touch activities.

## Masters RL

Masters in 2022 continued its growth from 2021 with the registration of 65 men's teams and 4 women's teams, plus a record attendance at a Master's festival of 440 players, with 7 teams attending the International Masters Festival in November. This saw teams from England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, France, Canada, and Australia all participating at York St. John's University. 43 new qualified referees within the Master's section saw the pool of referees grow to 200 qualified overall.

## X-League

X-League hosted its first World Cup event at Sheffield Hallam University in November 2022 which saw England, Ireland and Scotland all attend, in addition to 10 community club teams ranging from Warrington and Oxford to Brighton. The rules for X-League have been standardised more so than previous years, aligning the community game rules with the international rules thus increasing the time period for games and refining the 'limited contact' between players to make it safer and more attractive to play. The finalised online match officials course provided more guidance for referees and players at the 6 X-League Grand Prix events delivered throughout 2022.

Touch RL will be a priority focus area for 2023 with club Foundations supporting the delivery of various new touch initiatives.

## Sustainability

The final area of our work supporting the core community game focuses on supporting clubs' Foundations and RFL to become more sustainable. This will deliver a more sustainable community game less reliant on public funding and generate additional funds to invest in growth.

A key focus throughout 2022 has been to ensure both Foundations and clubs were in the best possible place financially to withstand the challenges of emerging from Covid and the developing cost of living crisis. The range of grants we were able to secure are set out more fully in the Social Impact section below.

In addition to securing additional revenues to support the game and inspire our communities, we continue to work with clubs to put in place Club Development Plans and health checks. This work continues throughout 2023 as we look to work with clubs to maximise the legacy of RLWC2021.

## Our League Active

2022 was the first year we introduced a participant membership scheme within the community game. OLA has achieved all targets set for its launch year and had a total of £6300 donations and more than 1000 people taking out membership who were not required to do so. The monies raised by this vital membership will ensure we can keep running and developing the community game for the sport. We provide updates to the Community Board on a regular basis and also provided updates through these 'More than a Sport' updates to the whole community game.

During the consultation process we estimated that it costs more than £700,000 to service the community game. These costs will be reviewed annually and communicated across the community game.

In 2023 we are once again working with those clubs who wish to pay their player's OLA fees and will be issuing invoices. There are however no guarantees that we will be able to facilitate this service year on year as OLA is designed to be an individual participant membership scheme.

Players that earned points by engaging with the Our League app in 2022 to predict scores, vote on player of the match etc will have the option to use any points generated to redeem against their fee. This is known as Rewards4. We are pushing out the benefits of Rewards4 at our pre-season meetings and on our social media channels.

## Governance

We did a lot of work in 2022 on governance for community clubs. These will be available on the community game club hub section on Our Learning Zone. This will be helpful for clubs to access help and support including guidance on good governance to assist clubs to raise awareness of legal, regulatory, tax and other statutory requirements and to improve club sustainability by encouraging good management and governance.

*Ince  
Rose Bridge  
Girls*

## Education

### Schools

In September 2021 the education season saw a formal and structured return to play following the pandemic, albeit with some trepidation remaining in several institutions about the ongoing risk of infection, with the mandatory wearing of face masks and social distancing restrictions adding to the feeling of uncertainty and the potential impact that further absences and potential mass infections and close contact cases could have on the academic progress of students. This resulted in a lower than usual participation rate across all three education sectors (schools, colleges and universities) at our initial stage of return to play.

We reintroduced the School Games 9s competition in a partnership to promote the Rugby League World Cup. The competition was held under the name of “Inspiration All 9s”, a nod to the legacy work of the RLWC2021 outside of the actual playing of the tournament. Foundations and strategic partners delivered local festivals on a countrywide scale, from the North East to the South West, with winning teams invited to attend our national finals in July to represent their club and area. The RLWC trophies made an appearance at the finals, and all schools reaching the national stage were given a ticket for a RLWC2021 fixture. Over 4500 participants took part in a 9s event in their local area, and for the first time since the inception of the 9s concept at School Games level, we included a tournament for Y7 and 8 girls to play together and experience their first taste of contact Rugby League.

### College and University

There was a similar downward trend in registrations across our HE and FE offers in colleges and universities, where participant numbers are taken directly from our registered players in the relevant leagues. College teams would have found themselves recruiting a whole new squad of players following 1 1/2 years of no fixtures. In universities, third year students would have had a taste of activity in their freshers year and would then be in a position of having to recruit enough players from the incoming first year cohort to ensure they had a squad ready to play in the BUCS competition which started back up in October 2021. There was the added complication of some university courses remaining online or adopting a hybrid model which meant less students on campus and therefore fewer available to sign up for sports teams and participate in regular activity.

While the numbers in our core offers declined post Covid we were successful in widening our playing offers within the sector. In colleges we partnered with the Association of Colleges to acquire a grant from the RLWC2021 Created By fund to purchase Tag Rugby League starter sets which were distributed out to multiple establishments. These colleges nominated groups of students to receive training on the delivery of Tag RL and were tasked with establishing regular sessions during enrichment hours at their college and delivering festivals to local primary schools. With the locations of the colleges receiving the sets including Peterborough, Northampton, Stoke and Preston, this led to Rugby League playing opportunities well outside of our core areas of participation.

Additionally in colleges, we established more regular playing opportunities for girls' teams with festival activity split regionally across the North West and Yorkshire, alongside national dates with open invites to all established teams. The college season ended with a very successful event at Headingley stadium as we hosted our Cup final there for the first time. The game was won by Warrington Wolves Development Academy, beating Leeds Rhinos Development Academy. Both teams have applied to join the Premier competition this season, testament to the success that they are having with their recruitment and development of students. Further proof of this is players from both teams gaining scholarships with their respective clubs despite being overlooked in previous years.

We have taken a slightly different approach to the league structures in 2022/23 including a grading phase in September and October to place colleges in competitions suited to their playing level. We have also linked up with the AOC once again to explore ways to grow the game in colleges outside of our core areas, with flexible playing offers and both staff and player development opportunities.

Off field, work has been done to improve the status of Rugby League within universities and participation in BUCS competitions. We now have a specific Rugby League Coordinator to work at BUCS and Maz Veater is now employed in this post, starting in November 2022. Her primary focus is to sustain and grow the men's competition and ensure a viable women's playing offer appears on the BUCS framework by the end of 2024.

The Introduction to Teaching Rugby League course delivered to ITE students completing postgraduate teaching qualifications, and therefore the next generation of the PE workforce in schools, was delivered to 242 students across 13 cohorts at 10 institutions. The forecast for 2022/23 is to add at least another 4 universities and continue delivery to those where relationships are already established.

## Social Impact

***Supporting our people and communities is a fundamental part of who we are. We are working to become more inclusive by expanding our disability offers, and more diverse by supporting our clubs to become more representative of the communities within which they are based. We deliver our positive social impact work through Our League Life, the RFL's social impact brand.***

Learning Disability Rugby League continues to grow with over 300 registered participants in the Community Integrated Care Super League. With 16 Foundations now delivering a learning disability offer there are more opportunities for people living with learning and intellectual disabilities and associated conditions to participate than ever before. We continue to create life changing moments and development opportunities through Community Integrated Care and the RLWC2021 inclusive volunteering programme, aiding its participants in becoming more socially mobile and accessing genuine working skills. Furthermore 2022 witnessed the return to Magic Weekend where over 300 players took part in festival type and on-pitch activities at St James Park. The season was finished with a national World Cup themed round where each nation was represented by Learning Disability Super League teams at the event. Over 300 participants were then given tickets to watch a game local to them during the RLWC2021.

The Physical Disability Rugby League competition has grown and seen participation from Bradford Bulls and Salford Red Devils in addition to those who have historically engaged in the game. The variant has also continued to progress from a representative point of view. We have seen a significant number of participants progress through the classification process which for some led to selection for the England Community Lions. Representative programmes will continue to expand and give all participants a better aspirational playing offer and more robust equitable playing opportunities in reference to impairment levels.

The wheelchair competition has continued to develop with growth in facilities, resources and developing competitions. One highlight this season has been the interaction with French champions Catalans Dragons and their entry into this year's Betfred Wheelchair Challenge Cup. Eventually, after a fantastic festival qualifying event, they met Leeds Rhinos in the final with Leeds coming out on top and retaining the trophy. Away from this, the Wheelchair Super League saw its first ever Magic Weekend hosted at the National Basketball Centre in Manchester, bringing 8 teams together in one venue over a single day, mirroring the men's running game. Over the last 18 months through different funding channels, we have also been able to deliver nearly 200 sports chairs into the game resulting in many more teams having more resources and more opportunities to engage with the sport. The Wheelchair RL Grand Final took place at the National Basketball Centre and was broadcast on Sky Sports bringing greater visibility to the game ahead of the RLWC2021 where the Wheelchair Rugby League World Cup took place alongside the men's and women's event in the most inclusive World Cup ever.

With games taking place at first class venues and broadcast across BBC channels, the impact and interest in the Wheelchair Rugby League games taking place at the RLWC2021 finals were remarkable. Nobody could have envisaged the profile and interest in the wheelchair tournament that was created by the England team's journey to the final and eventual lifting of the trophy. In the immediate aftermath of the tournament, we worked with wheelchair clubs to provide ample opportunity for those enthused by what they had seen as part of the RLWC2021 to attend 'have a go' sessions in multiple locations. Whilst it is too early to say exactly what the impact will be on the numbers of registered participants playing Wheelchair Rugby League, the early indications are numbers will be significantly higher than in previous years with many new teams and new playing opportunities at existing clubs.



**To continue to build stronger communities, we support Clubs and Foundations in attracting funding to ensure they are sustainable. The various funding and programme initiatives that the RFL's Social Impact team are currently working on are outlined below;**

### **Tackling Inequalities Fund**

The Tackling Inequalities Fund has supported 168 Community Game organisations with grants across two phases. The total £300,000 fund has directly supported Rugby League's Community Game to continue to tackle inequalities across the sport.

Phase One targeted under-represented groups in the most deprived areas of our community game and Wheelchair RL game.

Phase Two targeted Women & Girl's RL, PDRL, LDRL, Masters, smaller clubs who are in a deprived area, and clubs who have players travelling from deprived areas.

We are currently working with Community Clubs, teams and Foundations to complete all monitoring & evaluation requirements.

The Tackling Inequalities Fund has now evolved into the Together Fund and we have secured a further £75,000 from Sport England. This will continue to target lower-socio economic groups with a focus on Women & Girls RL and Disability RL. The fund will close on the 17th March 2023.

### **Rugby League Survival Fund**

£1,501,500 of RL Survival Funding was awarded to the Community Game across 191 organisations. The total fund has been distributed to all successful applicants after all partnership agreements were completed in 2022.

Although this fund has now closed and all award decisions were signed off by the 31st of March 2022, the monitoring and evaluation process is underway. This process, in partnership with Sport England, was updated to streamline the journey for community clubs and Foundations. 125 out of 191 applicants have completed their required M&E. The RFL Development team will continue to support the organisations to complete this process.

### **RLWC2021 – InspiredBy**

This included Community Club and Foundation activity, Leagues Rounds and micro grants to fund equipment and resources. The grant scheme was the first stage of the RFL's InspiredBy campaign, which aimed to drive participation in Rugby League in all its variants across England before, during, and after RLWC2021.

Community clubs were supported in their efforts to encourage children and young people to give Rugby League a go as a step towards becoming regular players. InspiredBy also helped community clubs to become 'World Cup Ready' and build support for the three England teams.

Over 100 Community clubs were successful in receiving an InspiredBy micro grant. This included a range of support in promoting their activities along with a grant of up to £500.

### **RLWC2021 - CreatedBy Funding**

Since reopening the small-scale programme in April 2022, the total of applications received has risen to 127 with 101 awards totalling approximately £1m. Undoubtedly the Small Grants Programme has been a real success and will provide some useful learnings for other funding programmes moving forwards. All funding for Large Scale projects has been committed and the remaining small-scale funding should be committed in the first quarter of 2023.

Supporting our people and communities drives us. Maximising Rugby League's proven ability to deliver social impact programmes through new programmes and initiatives is a major part of the sport's sustainable future.

## **Our League Life Community hubs - Wellbeing Hubs Pilots**

The concept of the Community Hubs is supporting how community club resources are used in more innovative or diverse ways that have a wider social impact. The creation of a 'Social Wellbeing Hub' will allow a RL facility to be recognised as being at the centre of the community. The Hub will create a more sustainable future by generating income and increased usage without compromising the playing of Rugby League. Five community clubs have piloted the project, these are:

**Shevington Sharks ARLFC, Wigan, Greater Manchester.**

**West Hull ARLRFC, Hull, Yorkshire**

**Salford City Roosters ARLFC, Eccles, Greater Manchester**

**Portico Vine ARLFC, St Helens, Greater Merseyside**

**West Leeds ARLFC, Leeds, Yorkshire**

These Community Clubs are at different stages of engagement and are looking at their local needs and supporting off-field activity. This is to enable the clubs to be truly representative of the wider community and provide the benefits inclusive.

This project engages the wider local community including:

- Local Government, Council / MP's
- Health and Primary Care Clinical commissioning groups
- Education Primary Schools, Secondary schools, FE and HE
- Public Services Police, Fire Brigade, Ambulance Services, Community Support Officers
- Youth Wellbeing
- Local Charities
- Local Businesses

Activation of the partnerships will bring benefits to the local community including healthcare and education improvement via social and environmental improvements and services available. The next step for this project is to release an Our Learning Zone resource on Community Wellbeing.

Hubs, including how to become one, for community clubs to access. Our target is to have 20 Hubs running by December 2023.

## **Partners**

Much of the work we do to build stronger communities and deliver our social impact programmes is delivered in conjunction with partner organisations. Partners can bring specific expertise and add significant value. We continue to work closely with Community Integrated Care who do so much to support our Learning Disability Rugby offers including our Inclusive Volunteering Programme.

Other partnerships include;

## **Street Games**

The RFL continue to work with Street Games to facilitate and support 10 Locally Trusted Organisations to deliver a community focused new 4-a-side, non-contact format of the game and bring Rugby League to the heart of the communities in and around Manchester. Street Games' Northwest regional team will select and recruit organisations to deliver the project, focussing on those who do not currently offer Rugby League in their existing offer. The RFL will support in signposting participants to exits routes such as playing or volunteering at a local Rugby League club.



## Access Sport

Access Sport are a disability sport delivery charity who have previously partnered with other national governing bodies such as Basketball and Hockey. The partnership with the RFL sets out to deliver CPD to clubs and community settings to upskill and create inclusive environments where participants with disabilities can come and access a form of tag/touch Rugby League. This is titled the TRYZ programme and can be seen via this link.

The approach is Pan-Disability and targeting young people and their families to engage and deliver the social impact of Rugby League participation as well as create more inclusive environments within the community game. Initially, the focus is where we do not already have a significant footprint in the disability variants and the fledgling shoots of delivery are now beginning to take place in Bristol, Devon and the South West, Newcastle and the North East, London and surrounding South East via community clubs, professional club foundations and education settings. The outcomes intended are to create a lifelong affiliation and love for Rugby League in these regions within disability communities. This creates sustainable playing pools who can then specialise, when at a critical mass, to create formal organised LD, PD or Wheelchair specific variants.

## RFL Facilities Strategy:

Work to produce the new RFL Strategy is ongoing. During November we undertook a consultation process with community Rugby League clubs and staff to refine the initial facilities survey developed by KKP. This helped us get to a point where the survey covered all necessary areas, was easy to understand and an appropriate length to gather all necessary information without being overly onerous.

We are also consolidating the information gathered in the survey with the data available from PitchPower giving us a thorough insight into the landscape of each community club. The Pitch Power assessments are undertaken by the GMA and provide a thorough insight into the status and condition of playing provision on site.

The survey is now live and to date 40% of clubs have completed. Our mission is to get as many community clubs to accurately complete the survey as possible, to give us the richest data possible for the development of the RFL Facilities Strategy.

A Link and QR code to the survey can be found below:



*Rugby League Club Survey ([snapsurveys.com](https://snapsurveys.com))*

We continue to play an active role in the Multi-Sport Stakeholder Group maximising the opportunities for Rugby League to benefit from the Football Foundations multi-sport investment and linking in the Football Foundation and Sport England into multi-sport opportunities.

We also continue to work with Sport England on planning and policies supporting community clubs and we are currently involved with over 30+ Playing Pitch Strategies within the planning system.

## Volunteers

Whilst we have specific focus areas to drive participant numbers in 2023 and beyond, supporting volunteers remains a key priority. Volunteers are the lifeblood of our sport. Rugby League could not exist without them. Attracting new volunteers to support the accelerated growth we have seen across the women and girls' game and our inclusive offers such as Wheelchair RL, PDRL and LDRL is crucial if the growth is to be maintained.

Most of the participation takes place in traditional community club settings. The RFL has a vision for welcoming community clubs that puts our players first, offering recreational enjoyment for children and adults alike in a safe and inclusive environment. Necessary compliance and costs associated with complying with the various regulatory frameworks that exist to ensure sport is delivered in a safe environment can significantly increase the workload and pressure placed on volunteers and act as a barrier. As a sport, we should provide the tools, guidance and support networks needed so that volunteers are skilled, effectively identified, and mobilised, feel appreciated and recognised. The roadmap to enable us to deliver on this commitment is set out in the new RFL Volunteer strategy which will be published in the first quarter of 2023.

Much of the work throughout 2022 has revolved around the RLWC2021. Any major event entices new volunteers to the sport as well as providing a once in a lifetime opportunity for some of our existing volunteer workforce to support delivery of a world class sporting event. Linked to the RLWC2021 a new volunteering portal has been introduced which provides a streamlined mechanism directing new volunteers towards opportunities that exist within the community game.

Work is ongoing to transition members of the RLWC2021 Power Squad into new roles within the community game and a series of roadshows will be taking place over the coming weeks to support this initiative.

## Match officials

### Recruitment

In 2022 there were 31 Match Official courses held at different locations up and down the country and virtually.

### Retention

The courses produced 463 newly qualified officials with 124 joining a society and refereeing a match in the Community Game (retention rate 26.78%). Upcoming courses can be found [HERE](#).

Match Official abuse continues to be a barrier to retention; however, the introduction of head cams is a proactive step to try and improve the environment both on the field and on touchlines.

There is ongoing work progressing looking deeper into why the conversion rate is low (i.e. conversion from actually taking the course to refereeing in the community game). The Community Board asked for more information on this and for us to explore more data as to why this is the case; this is a focus for 2023.

### Women and Girls Match Official Recruitment

The 'all ages and stages' programme was launched which will cover all variations of Rugby League and cater for all levels of interest and ambition, from the community game to Super League. The objective is to increase female participation in officiating by offering further support with specific recruitment and development opportunities.

The programme was launched at the Totally Wicked Stadium for Women's Super League finals day which was a great success.

Specific Women's and Girl's courses took place in 2022 and will continue into 2023, so far attracting significant interest and helping to recruit new female officials.



The next gathering will take place on 1st April with a total of 65 female officials from up and down the country invited.

Anybody interested in being a part of the programme should register their interest online [HERE](#). Email enquiries can also be made via [RIwgoprogram@rfl.co.uk](mailto:RIwgoprogram@rfl.co.uk).

## Head Cams

Following the successful trial of head cams in the NCL in 2022, a total of 200 head cams have been distributed to societies to be used in the Community Game.

Rugby League led the way with introducing head cams and consequently other Governing Bodies have now followed suit.

The head cams will be used to capture footage that may be useful to support the decisions of disciplinary panels, but also has a development tool for coaching Match Officials. Feedback from the NCL trial highlighted participant behaviour improvement with the deterrent of a head cam being worn.

Funding from Enjoy the Game, BARLA and respective regional leagues have contributed to the purchase of these cameras.

## Match Official Fee Increase

The Community Board reviewed the match official community game fee structure in recognition of the cost-of-living increase (including fuel prices). The current rates of pay have, by large, existed the same for the last 10 years.

To ensure that we continue to encourage more match officials (including touch judges), to take up more regular appointments, it was agreed that a minimum match official fee structure should be introduced throughout the Community game.

	U12s	U13s & U14s	U15s & U16s	U17s & U18s	Open Age	Universities & Colleges	NCL	SCL
Referee	£18	£25	£28	£30	£35	£35	£40	£50
Touch Judge				£18	£18	£18	£18	£18

Leagues who provide banded mileage increases dependant on mileage are still permitted to incorporate the banding structure. The recommended mileage structure is set out below:

- 0 – 30 – recommended **set fee**
- 31 – 60 – increase match fee by **£4**
- 61 – 80 – increase match fee by **£8**
- 81 – 100 – increase match fee by **£12**
- 101 – 120 – increase match fee by **£16**

These fees apply to both male and female matches and should be the minimum applied throughout Community Rugby League active as of 1st January 2023.

## **British Rugby League Referees Club**

2023 sees the introduction of British Rugby League Referees, a club for all Match Officials in the UK. The objective is to complement strong Societies and provide support to identified Target Areas where we are currently short on both officials and volunteers.

The aim is for the BRLRC to act primarily as a Social Club which can bring together officials across all levels of the game with an emphasis on social interaction, pooling volunteers to assist in target areas and ultimately to distribute information and education more directly with a focus on increasing retention and camaraderie amongst Match Officials.

Membership is free to all active Officials and Society members across England, Wales and Scotland and is inclusive of all forms of the sport currently being offered creating inclusivity with social Rugby League variants. The registration form collects information which will allow the members to voice an opinion on what matters most to them. We are committed to the project being tagged as 'By the Refs, For the Refs'

Social gatherings will be held as the season progresses, with an end of season awards evening recognising the efforts and achievements of Match Officials from the Community, Social RL through to Super League.

