

MINUTES

Community Game Strategic Advisory Group Meeting

Location:	RFL, House of Sport, Gate 13, Rowsley Street, Manchester, M11 3FF	Date:	8 th July 2026
		Time:	4.00 pm until 7.00 pm
In Attendance:	Neil Ashton, Fred Baker, Jake Brook, Mark Cordeaux, Steve Curtis, Steve Langrick, Tracey Leung-Fullerton, Nick Leigh, Lee Mitchell, Stuart Prior, Sue Taylor MBE	Chairperson:	Martin Coyd OBE
Apologies:	Anji Gardner, Colonel David Groce OBE		
RFL Officers in Attendance:	Kelly Barrett, Marc Lovering	Invited Guests:	

Item No.	Agenda Item	Action
1.0	Welcome Mr Coyd welcomed attendees and noted the importance of visibility and leadership presence across the community game. Members reflected positively on recent major events including Magic Weekend and Wembley, noting both operational successes and areas for improvement.	
2.0	Any Other Business Mr Cordeaux shared a quote from a young person in the North East who attended the Challenge Cup Final through the informal community access programme coordinated between RL Commercial and the RFL Development Team: “This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me. The excitement as we entered Wembley was something special. It has inspired me to dream bigger, become more active and see what is possible through the sport.” Mr Cordeaux explained that this feedback reflects the wider impact of the informal partnership which has quietly enabled significant numbers of young people from community organisations to experience major rugby league events for the first time. For context, 37 organisations attended the Challenge Cup Final in May, with 678 young people experiencing a rugby league event for the first time. Mr Cordeaux noted that this work is not widely known due to the sensitivity around distributing tickets outside the club network, but the outcomes demonstrate clear social value and strong alignment with the sport’s strategic priorities around inclusion, inspiration, and participant growth. Mr Coyd acknowledged the importance of capturing and amplifying these stories as part of the sport’s broader narrative and encouraged consideration of how such impact could be reflected in future CGSAG communications and	

fulfilment, and ongoing coordination challenges around match officials, data quality, and calendar alignment across league, cup, district, Lions, BARLA and festival activity. Despite the pressure, the NCRL framework is stabilising the community game for the first time, providing a single point of governance and insight.

In the Men's game, the new pyramid is bedding in well, with Premier and Division One stable and regional conferences largely functioning as intended, though travel pressures remain in the South and Cumbria. Key issues include referee shortages, A-team fragility due to brain health guidance, calendar congestion, and behaviour concerns at a small number of clubs. National Cup fulfilment has been low and requires a full review for 2027, and promotion pathways need urgent clarification due to misconceptions among some clubs.

The Women's game continues to grow, supported by League 3 and five new or returning clubs, though late withdrawals have reduced League 1 and the Southern Championship remains unstable. Opportunities exist through the Women's Roadmap, improved off-field standards, and a move toward 8-team divisions.

The Girls' game remains one of the strongest growth areas, with 86 clubs and 194 teams and strong recruitment at younger ages. However, Premier Division fulfilment is inconsistent, postponement reasoning is often poor, and behaviour concerns are increasing, alongside facility pressures. Girls Hubs and DICE continue to strengthen the pathway.

In the Boys' game, fulfilment has improved through the minimum-15 rule, but scholarship movement continues to disrupt teams, and District Cups are causing calendar clashes, unsanctioned fixtures and safeguarding concerns. CPD delivery remains strong, with over 650 coaches supported.

Primary Rugby League continues to benefit from strong regional collaboration, with tournament reform underway and positive engagement from regional leads. Volunteer capacity remains a pressure point, particularly around fixture organisation and scheduling tools, and recruitment and retention challenges persist in some areas. The Group noted that coach education at younger ages is becoming increasingly important, particularly as players transition into tackle.

It was confirmed that tackle workshops will be made mandatory for all coaches delivering U9s from the 2027 season, ensuring a consistent, safe and development-focused introduction to contact across the country. This requirement aligns with the Primary RL principles and supports improved player experience and coach confidence. Further information will be issued shortly, including delivery timelines, expectations for clubs, and how Foundations and regional staff will support implementation.

Player Development activity is now fully aligned with NCRL governance, with multi-team formats at U7–U9, national small-sided delivery, and over 900 coaches supported through PRL and Foundation CPD. Key next steps include addressing calendar congestion, reviewing youth transition to Open Age, strengthening links between LDP, Community Lions and clubs, and standardising LDP accreditation.

Match officials remain a significant pressure point, with national shortages, behaviour concerns, underreporting and acute issues in Cumbria. Development centres have been re-established, and proposals for 2027

	include club-based officials, scheduling reform and a National Match Officials Association. Behaviour across the game continues to be a major concern, with over 30 matches abandoned this season and serious incidents including match official assault and spectator violence. CGSAG agreed that behaviour must remain a strategic priority, requiring proactive intervention, education, leadership accountability and consistent sanctions. It was further noted that future NCRL reporting to CGSAG would be provided on a 'by-exception' basis, with the Group focusing only on items requiring strategic discussion, such as risks, issues, structural pressures, behaviour concerns, or decisions needed, rather than full operational updates. This ensures CGSAG maintains a proportionate, strategic oversight role while detailed operational matters continue to be managed through the NCRL Management Group.	
7.0	Participant Growth Mr Lovering outlined the wider strategic context in which the sport is currently operating, noting that Sport England has now announced a transitional funding year starting from April 2027. The RFL will work with Sport England in the interim to establish how the RFL can support delivery of Sport England outcomes, highlighting that Sport England is placing greater emphasis on place-based investment, with several sports adopting Place Manager or Place Led roles to link activity across local systems. Mr Lovering explained that rugby league may need to consider similar place-based approaches to strengthen alignment between Foundations, clubs, local authorities, schools and community partners, ensuring more consistent delivery and clearer local accountability. Mr Lovering highlighted that the Club Foundation Network has undergone a significant shift over the past decade. During the Sky Try era, Foundations delivered large-scale school programmes funded through a single participation model, generating around 5% annual growth. Since then, Foundations have diversified into broader social-impact delivery, including mental health, employability, inclusion, disability sport and community wellbeing, which has strengthened their sustainability and widened playing offers but reduced the proportion of staff time dedicated to rugby league-specific development. As a result, current participation growth sits closer to 1 to 2%, and the sport no longer has a consistent national mechanism for direct delivery of rugby league activity. Mr Lovering emphasised that the Development Team has no staff delivering regular rugby league sessions, meaning participation growth is now heavily dependent on Foundations, volunteers and clubs. This has created regional variation, with some areas benefiting from strong Foundation–club alignment and others experiencing limited engagement. He stressed that the transitional year requires the sport to define a clearer national model for participation growth, one that balances social-impact delivery with rugby league development and provides a sustainable route for increasing player numbers. Mr Mitchell, recently appointed Chief Executive of Warrington Wolves Foundation, was congratulated on his appointment and invited to present Warrington's emerging development model as a potential blueprint for a	

	national approach. He explained that Foundations are increasingly expected to deliver wide-ranging social-impact programmes, which has reduced capacity for rugby league-specific work. To address this, Warrington proposes appointing two Rugby League Development Officers (East and West) whose roles would be dedicated solely to rugby league growth. These officers would provide holistic support to clubs, including operations, safeguarding, volunteer development and heritage, alongside structured coach development, high-school rugby league delivery, and a strengthened player pathway. Mr Mitchell confirmed that strengthening high-school rugby league delivery is a key component of Warrington's long-term plan, with a particular focus on supporting players at key transition ages. He emphasised that improved engagement with secondary schools will help retain more young people in the sport and create a more consistent pathway from Primary RL into junior rugby league. This forms part of Warrington's broader ambition to "broaden for longer", ensuring players remain in community environments with high-quality coaching and development support. Mr Mitchell outlined Warrington's "broader for longer" talent philosophy, which reduces scholarship intake to ensure more players remain in community environments for longer, supported by improved coaching and development structures. The model includes Broader Pathway sessions, Forge (LDP), Development Academy, Prospects, and bespoke coaching for clubs. He emphasised that this approach is designed to create sustainable, long-term growth by supporting volunteers, improving coaching standards, and strengthening club–Foundation relationships. Mr Raybould presented data insights showing significant gaps in U7/U8 provision in Yorkshire, particularly in Wakefield, Castleford and Huddersfield. The data demonstrates a clear correlation between early-age provision and long-term club sustainability, with clubs lacking U7/U8 teams more likely to experience decline within five years. The Group recognised that the Warrington model provides a strong example of how Foundations could rebalance their delivery to support both social-impact outcomes and rugby league participation. Further exploration will be undertaken to understand how similar approaches could be adapted and scaled nationally as part of the Sport England transition.	
8.0	Commercial and Revenue Generation Due to time constraints, the Commercial and Revenue Generation item was deferred. Mr Coyd emphasised the importance of maintaining momentum in this area, noting that commercial growth, brand value and revenue diversification are essential to sustaining both participation and social-impact activity. Members were encouraged to share any emerging opportunities or concerns ahead of the next meeting so that commercial priorities can be integrated into the agenda.	
9.0	Brand, Media, Marketing, and Events This item was also deferred, but the Chair reiterated the need for stronger, more proactive storytelling across the community game. Recent examples, including the Challenge Cup access programme, LDSL visibility at Magic Weekend, and the growing national interest in inclusion formats, demonstrate the sport's ability to reach new audiences and inspire participants.	

	The Group agreed that improved coordination between NCRL, Foundations, RL Commercial and the RFL Communications Team would help ensure positive stories are surfaced, amplified and aligned with strategic priorities. This will be revisited at the next meeting.	
10.0	Meeting Close Mr Coyd thanked members for their contributions. Meeting closed at 7.00 pm.	