

COMMUNITY RUGBY LEAGUE

**MORE THAN A
SPORT REVIEW**

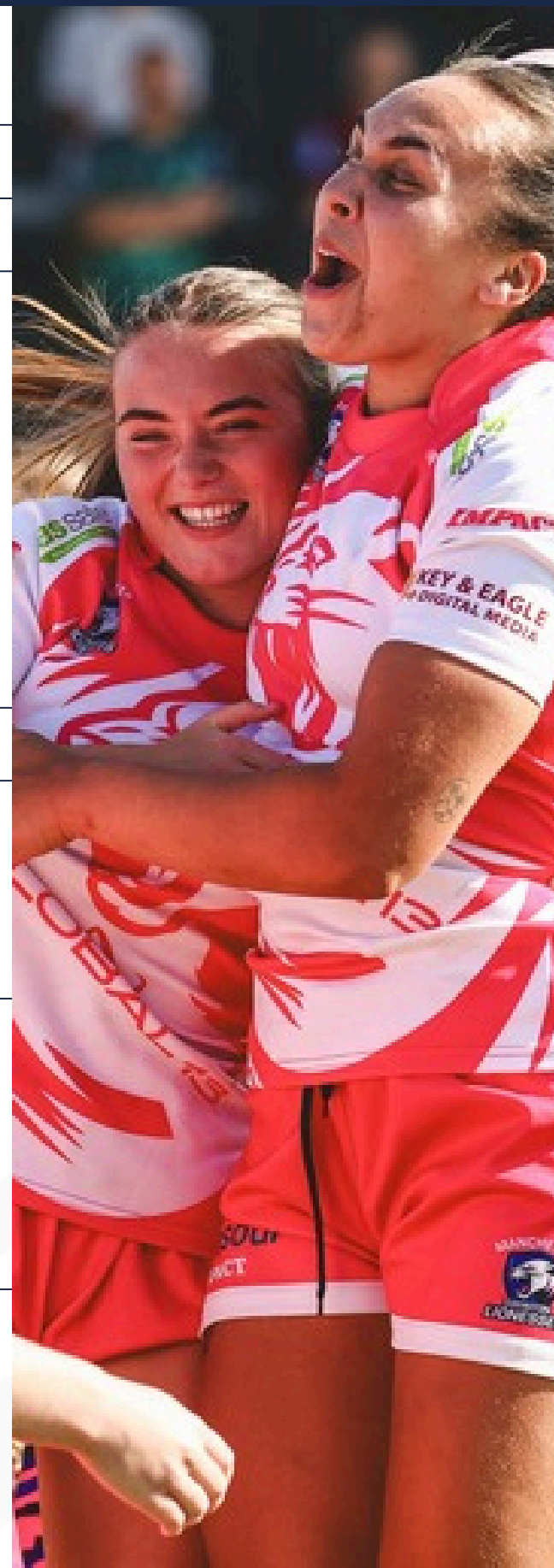
MID-YEAR 2026



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first half of 2026 has seen continued progress across Community Rugby League, with growth in participation, significant changes to competition structures and further development of the programmes, partnerships and infrastructure that support the game.

Core Community participation has increased by 2.6% compared with mid-year 2025, reaching 43,188 participants and already approaching the total recorded across the whole of last year.

Growth has continued across Primary and Junior Rugby League, while Open Age participation has returned to growth. Female participation has increased particularly strongly, rising by 7.3% overall, including continued growth at Youth level. The principal participation challenge is male Youth, which has reduced by 6.4%, reinforcing the importance of retaining players through the U16-U18 age groups and providing appropriate competition and playing opportunities.

The introduction of the National Community Rugby League (NCRL) has been a major development during 2026, bringing Community Game competitions from Under-12 through to Open Age within a more aligned governance framework. The new Men's competition pyramid and aligned Youth & Junior competitions have become established during their first season, with the focus now on consolidating and embedding the agreed structures while using learning from the inaugural year to strengthen competition delivery for 2027.

Work to support growth through retention has continued alongside structural change. Tag Rugby League is now embedded from Under-6 to Under-8, more than 400 coaches have engaged with Primary Rugby League development activity, and the National Primary Rugby League Festival attracted more than 470 players. The England Community Lions programme has also continued to provide aspirational opportunities, with more than 700 players nominated and 126 going on to represent England at community or university level.

The Women & Girls game continues to develop strongly, supported by growth across the younger age groups, new clubs and teams, development through Futures and RugBees, and further strengthening of the player and coaching pathways. Ensuring that this growth is supported by sustainable clubs and competitions, while addressing behaviour and fixture fulfilment challenges, will remain important during the remainder of the year.

Education continues to provide significant reach into Rugby League, with almost 16,500 pupils participating in Champion Schools, approximately 7,500 participants engaged through School Games 9s activity, and growth continuing across the female College game and University Rugby League. These programmes remain important both as routes into the sport and as opportunities to retain participants through key transition points.



Rugby League's wider social impact has continued to grow through new investment and partnerships. More than £1.5 million has been secured for Try for Tomorrow, which will use the reach of Rugby League to engage schools, clubs and communities in climate action.

Community Wellbeing Hubs and the DWP Youth Guarantee partnership continue to extend the contribution of clubs and Foundations beyond playing participation. Inclusive Rugby League has also continued to develop its playing structures and opportunities, although overall Inclusion participation is currently 7.7% below mid-year 2025, predominantly due to a reduction in PDRL registrations.

Alongside participation and programme development, continued focus has been placed on the sustainability of the Community Game. Volunteer registrations have increased by 7.2%, although reductions in key club-management roles highlight ongoing pressures on club capacity. Investment in facilities, support for club governance and financial resilience, and the continued development of the Respect programme all contribute to creating stronger and more sustainable environments in which Rugby League can take place.

The priorities for the remainder of 2026 are therefore to sustain participation growth while addressing male Youth retention; consolidate and refine the NCRL competition structures; strengthen behaviour and positive environments; support the sustainability of clubs, volunteers and facilities; and continue to maximise Rugby League's wider impact within its communities.





INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Mid-Year 2026 Community Rugby League: More Than a Sport update. This report summarises activities undertaken by the RFL Development Team between January and August 2026, providing an overview of progress, challenges, and priorities across the Community Game.

The Mid-Year 2026 update outlines progress across the Community Game, aligned with the Community Strategy & Vision 2022–2030. The strategy is built on three pillars:

- Supporting the core Community Game
- Expanding education-based rugby league
- Delivering positive social impact

This report highlights key achievements, growth areas, and strategic developments that continue to position Rugby League as a sport that drives connection, inclusion, and lifelong participation.

The end of the 2025 season was dominated by preparation ahead of the full launch of the National Community Rugby League (NCRL). The 2026 season kicked off with a more modern governance framework consisting of a single aligned structure covering all competitions from U12s to Open Age. Covid years aside, we have seen year on year growth in the sport since 2017. However, that was not the case with Men's Open Age which has witnessed year on year decline since 2019. The NCRL is not just a new competition, it reflects a new whole game approach. At Open Age this includes a new pyramid structure and transparent route for progression.

ACTIVE PARTICIPANT UPDATES

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). Mid-year reporting focuses primarily on participants taking part in core community club settings, with more comprehensive reporting, including social and educational activities, produced at the end of the year.

The 2026 mid-year figures show a positive overall position, with Core Community participation continuing to grow and already close to the total recorded at the end of 2025. Growth across Primary and Junior age groups, alongside a return to growth in Open Age participation, is particularly encouraging. However, the reduction in male Youth participation highlights an area requiring further focus as we look to retain players through the Youth pathway and into Open Age.



CORE COMMUNITY BREAKDOWN

CORE INDICATORS	BASELINE	YEAR 3 (23/24)		YEAR 4 (24/25)		YEAR 5 (25/26)		YEAR 6 (26/27)		MID YEAR
		Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	End of Year	
U7 to U11 (Primary)	12,000	13,615	14,602	13,672	14,368	14,041	14,921	14,536		3.53%
Boys		11,809	12,430	11,730	12,233	12,009	12,434	12,288		2.32%
Girls		1,806	2,172	1,942	2,135	2,032	2,487	2,248		10.63%
U12 to U15 (Junior)	9,400	11,579	11,893	12,064	12,319	12,317	12,652	12,884		4.60%
Boys		9,272	9,419	9,564	9,717	9,763	9,917	10,075		3.20%
Girls		2,307	2,474	2,500	2,602	2,554	2,735	2,809		9.98%
U16 to U18 (Youth)	4,800	5,226	5,437	4,046	4,082	4,322	4,339	4,133		-4.37%
Boys		4,463	4,639	3,418	3,445	3,658	3,671	3,425		-6.37%
Girls		763	798	628	637	664	668	708		6.63%
Open Age	18,099	11,085	11,492	11,993	12,205	11,422	11,682	11,635		1.80%
Men		9,502	9,798	10,222	10,387	9,816	10,012	10,041		2.29%
Women		1,583	1,694	1,771	1,818	1,606	1,670	1,594		-0.75%
Totals Male	0	35,046	36,286	34,934	35,782	35,246	36,034	35,829		1.60%
Total Female	0	6,459	7,138	6,841	7,192	6,856	7,560	7,359		7.34%
TOTAL		41,505	43,424	41,775	42,974	42,102	43,594	43,188		2.98%

Age:

Primary and Junior participation continues to grow compared to mid-year 2025:

- Primary +3.5% (14,536 v 14,041)
- Junior +4.6% (12,884 v 12,317)
- Youth -4.4% (4,133 v 4,322)

The reduction in Youth participation is driven by male Youth players, which are down 6.4%, while female Youth participation has increased by 6.6%.

Open Age has returned to growth, increasing by 1.9% compared to mid-year 2025 (11,635 v 11,422).



Gender

Overall male participation has increased by 1.7%, while female participation has increased by 7.3% compared to mid-year 2025.

Female participation continues to grow strongly across the younger age groups, including +6.6% at Youth, with female Youth participation already exceeding the total recorded at the end of 2025.

We are continuing to see growth in terms of the number of women's teams at Open Age. The slight decrease in overall numbers of female Open Age participants mid-year is because of the professional club pathways becoming more established and players being retained in that setting.

Overall: Core Community participation is up 2.6% compared to mid-year 2025 (43,188 v 42,102) and is already close to the total participation recorded at the end of 2025 (43,594).

CORE INDICATORS (INCLUSION)	YEAR 4 (2024)		YEAR 5 (2025)		YEAR 6 (2026)		MID YEAR
	MID YEAR	END OF YEAR	MID YEAR	END OF YEAR	MID YEAR	END OF YEAR	2025 V 2026
PDRL	218	223	224	228	157		-29.91%
LDRL	337	343	379	390	378		-0.26%
WHEELCHAIR	473	504	548	569	528		-3.65%
TOTAL	1,028	1,070	1,151	1,187	1,063		-7.65%

Inclusion participation is down 7.7% compared to mid-year 2025 (1,063 v 1,151), largely due to a reduction in PDRL registrations (157 v 224). LDRL participation remains broadly stable, with a smaller reduction in Wheelchair registrations.





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

CORE COMMUNITY

The Community Game remains the foundation of Rugby League, providing opportunities for people of all ages to participate, compete and remain connected to the sport.

During 2026, the focus has continued to shift from simply creating more opportunities to ensuring that the opportunities available are relevant, sustainable and provide a positive experience for participants. Retention remains as important as recruitment, particularly at key transition points across the player pathway.

The first half of the year has therefore focused on strengthening the playing offer, improving the consistency of the participant's experience and ensuring that competition and development opportunities better reflect the needs of players at different ages and stages.

National Community Rugby League

2026 has marked the first season of the National Community Rugby League (NCRL), introducing a more aligned approach to the governance and delivery of Community Game competitions from Under-12 through to Open Age.

The inaugural season provides an opportunity to embed the new framework while learning from its operation across different competitions and regions. The approach retains appropriate local delivery while seeking greater consistency in competition governance, standards and decision-making across the Community Game.

The Competition Management Groups have played an important role in supporting this transition, bringing experience and insight from across the Community Game, helping to identify emerging issues and ensuring that learning and good practice are considered collectively. Their continued engagement will be important as the NCRL is consolidated and strengthened for 2027, with a focus on sustainable competitions, appropriate playing opportunities and clear progression through the Community Game.

The development of the Women & Girls game forms an important part of this wider competition landscape and is covered separately within the Women & Girls section of this report.

Men's Competitions

The inaugural Men's structure has operated with National League Premier and National Division One, supported by five National Conferences and regional competitions below, creating a connected competition pathway from regional through to national level.



The two-division National League structure reflected the position supported by the former NCL Management Group and member clubs, who favoured retaining two national divisions during the transition into the NCRL. This differed from the original proposed model of a single National League which would have alleviated many of the challenges in the Conferences beneath but provided continuity for clubs as the wider competition structure became established. This structure will be kept under review.

The new pyramid has generally become established during its opening season, with the national competitions and five National Conferences providing the basis of the new structure.

As expected in a transitional year, the first season has highlighted areas for further consideration, including competition scheduling, fixture fulfilment and the operation of the National Cup, which will be reviewed ahead of 2027.

A fundamental principle of the NCRL is that the Men's competition operates as one connected pyramid. The National League, National Conferences and regional competitions are not standalone competitions from which clubs can select their preferred level. Promotion and relegation are integral to the structure and clubs are expected to progress through the pyramid in accordance with the agreed competition framework, subject to meeting the appropriate standards at each level.

As the first season progresses, clubs must understand and support this principle. The long-term success of the structure relies on clubs recognising their place within the wider pyramid and supporting movement between levels, enabling the competition to develop greater consistency, competitive balance and a sustainable pathway across the Men's Community Game.

The Competition Management Group will continue to review the operation of the pyramid, using the experience and learning from the inaugural season to identify where processes and competition arrangements can be strengthened. The focus for 2027 will be on consolidating and embedding the agreed structure, while making appropriate operational refinements to support its effective delivery.

Youth & Junior Competitions

A significant development for 2026 has been the bringing together of all Youth & Junior leagues under NCRL governance, creating an opportunity for greater consistency while retaining appropriate regional delivery.

Early progress has been encouraging. Across the Boys' game, fixture fulfilment has improved and changes to minimum player requirements have helped more fixtures to take place.

Regional collaboration has also strengthened, with closer alignment emerging between competition delivery and player development activity.



The first season has also highlighted areas requiring further attention. Calendar congestion remains a challenge, particularly where league, cup, district, representative and development activity overlap. Player movement associated with the performance pathway and the transition from Youth Rugby League into Open Age also require continued consideration.

The mid-year participation data reinforces the importance of this work. While participation continues to grow strongly at Primary and Junior level, male Youth participation is currently 6.4% below the same point in 2025. Retaining players through the Youth age groups and supporting their progression into Open Age Rugby League therefore remains an important priority.

Behaviour also remains a concern across parts of the Youth & Junior game and will continue to be addressed through competition governance, club support and the wider Respect programme.

The Competition Management Groups will continue to play an important role in the development and delivery of Youth & Junior Rugby League, bringing together experience from across the regional competitions and helping to identify and address common challenges. The NCRL provides the opportunity for learning and good practice from across these groups to be shared more widely, while recognising the different needs of individual regions.

During the remainder of 2026, the focus will be on learning from the first season under the NCRL and continuing to strengthen alignment across calendars, competition rules and playing opportunities. Working with the Competition Management Groups, this will help inform planning for 2027, with a particular focus on retention, appropriate playing opportunities and providing a more consistent pathway through the age groups.

Primary Rugby League

Primary Rugby League remains connected to the wider NCRL framework, with collaboration continuing between regional delivery groups during the first half of 2026. The detailed development of PRL, including Tag Rugby League, coach development and playing formats, is covered within the Growth through Retention section of this report.





Growth through Retention

Growth through retention remains a key priority across the Community Game, with the focus in 2026 continuing to be on improving playing experiences, providing appropriate development opportunities and supporting players to remain engaged with Rugby League for longer.

The first half of the year has seen further progress across Primary Rugby League (PRL), the Lions Development Programme (LDP), coach development and playing formats, building on the work undertaken throughout 2025.

Primary Rugby League

The transition to Tag Rugby League at Under-6 and Under-7 has continued to embed successfully, with the model extended to Under-8 in 2026 as planned. Tag is now being delivered across all three age groups nationally, providing a development-appropriate introduction to the sport and supporting the longer-term approach to contact.

The festival-based approach to PRL has also continued to develop, with the model rolled out across Yorkshire and the North West. More than 470 players attended the National Primary Rugby League Festival at Harrow School ahead of the Challenge Cup Final in May, compared with more than 350 players attending the equivalent national festival in 2025.

Coach development has been a significant area of progress. More than 400 coaches have attended Primary Rugby League workshops during 2026, compared with 220 during 2025. This increased engagement is important in supporting consistent delivery and ensuring the experience provided to young players remains centred on development, enjoyment and long-term participation.

Lions Development Programme

The Lions Development Programme continues to provide alternative playing formats and development environments alongside traditional community club competitions.

Work has commenced on the accreditation of LDP partners, which will strengthen governance and provide greater consistency across delivery. 50 club and Foundation staff attended the 2026 LDP Conference, supporting continued education around player development and alternative playing formats.

Collaboration with the Performance Department has also resulted in the development of a series of small-sided games designed to challenge and develop players in different ways. These games will become a mandated part of LDP activity and further support the wider One England approach to player development.

Improving Playing Experiences

Alongside the progress already made, work continues to consider how playing formats can better reflect the developmental needs of children and young people.



During the second half of 2026, work will begin to scope a review of playing formats between Under-10 and Under-13. The opportunity for Under-9 players to continue accessing Tag Rugby League alongside their transition to contact in 2027 will also be explored.

Development of an Early Years Rugby League Engagement Guide will provide clubs with practical guidance, session ideas and resources to support early-years activity and help create positive first experiences of Rugby League.

Further work will also continue to align the Community Game calendar and ensure playing opportunities are delivered consistently across competitions. Alongside this, the ongoing Scholarship review provides an important opportunity to ensure the needs and experiences of community players and clubs remain appropriately considered as the wider player pathway develops.

The quality of playing environments also remains important to retention, with wider work to address behaviour covered within the Respect section of this report.

The priority for the remainder of 2026 is to build on this progress, further strengthen the quality and consistency of delivery and ensure that playing formats, coaching and competition structures continue to put the long-term development and enjoyment of participants at their heart.

England Community Lions

The England Community Lions programme continues to provide aspirational representative opportunities for players within the Community Game, supporting development and retention while giving players the opportunity to represent their country.

The male programme across Under-16, Under-17, Under-19 and Universities has now been completed for 2026, with strong engagement across all age groups. More than 700 players were nominated by community clubs and universities, with over 600 attending trials. Twenty-two trials and 25 training sessions were delivered, resulting in 126 players representing England at community or university level.

Representative Success

The programme has delivered several strong performances during 2026. England Universities Men retained the Student Four Nations, while the Under-19s reached the final of the European Championship in France. The Under-17 programme competed internationally with fixtures against Scotland, Wales and France, while the Under-16s finished as runners-up in the Four Nations.

A revised approach also saw University, Under-16 and Under-17 internationals staged as double and triple headers, helping to create a stronger event experience across the programme.



Supporting the Whole Player

The Lions programme continues to develop beyond the playing experience. All youth programmes have received wellbeing support from RL Cares, including workshops covering brain health and sleep. Players have also accessed the 100% ME programme, alongside specific nutrition and hydration support for squads travelling to France.

The Energise Programme continues to support coach development, with one participant progressing into an assistant coach role within the Under-17 programme during 2026.

Providing Opportunity

For the third consecutive year, Lions trials were held in London to improve access to the representative pathway for talented players outside the traditional heartlands. This resulted in players progressing into both the Under-17 Regional team and the England Under-19 squad.

Community clubs also continue to play an important role by hosting training and representative fixtures, providing high-quality environments for the programme while creating opportunities for clubs to benefit from matchday activity.

Challenges and Priorities

The cost of attending trials, training and representative activity remains a challenge for some participants, particularly those travelling significant distances, while securing appropriate and consistent venues continues to be difficult without a central national base.

Player availability at Under-17 and Under-19 also reinforces the importance of managing the interaction between representative activity and Open Age Rugby League, ensuring player welfare and development remain central to decision-making.

The focus for the remainder of 2026 will be on maintaining high-quality representative opportunities, strengthening player and coach development and ensuring the programme remains accessible to talented Community Game players regardless of location or background.



Managing Player Load and the Playing Calendar

Player welfare continues to inform how the Community Game calendar is managed. The mandated off-season remains embedded across the game, providing players with a protected period away from contact Rugby League and ensuring appropriate recovery between seasons.

Increasingly, however, the focus is also on player load during the season. With players potentially participating across club competitions, school activities, representative Rugby League, talent pathways, festivals and other playing opportunities, individual activities cannot always be considered in isolation.

The RFL continues to strengthen oversight of playing activity to ensure that appropriate recovery is built into the calendar and that players are not exposed to excessive or repeated playing loads. This includes ensuring that additional fixtures, festivals and representative activity requiring approval are appropriately sanctioned and considered alongside existing competition commitments.

The objective is to avoid patterns of activity that could see players repeatedly required to play within short recovery periods and to ensure that the cumulative load on the player, rather than simply the demands of an individual competition or programme, informs decision-making.

The mandated Non-Contact Period remains an important part of this approach, running from mid-November to 31 December. Contact training can resume from 1 January, with friendlies, representative matches and talent pathway activity from 1 February and formal competition operating between 1 March and 31 October.





Participant Growth Initiatives

Alongside work to improve retention, targeted growth activity continues to focus on strengthening participation in established Rugby League communities while identifying sustainable opportunities to develop the game in areas with potential for expansion.

The increased availability and use of participation data during 2026 provides a clearer picture of where the game is growing and where additional support may be required. This is particularly evident within Primary Rugby League.

The mid-year participation data shows continued growth within Primary Rugby League, with 14,536 active participants compared with 14,041 at the same point in 2025, an increase of 3.5%.

Operational registration data also provides greater insight into where this growth is occurring. Growth has been particularly encouraging in Yorkshire, Cumbria and Hull, providing a positive platform for further development during the remainder of the year.

Targeted Regional Growth

The partnership approach in North Lancashire continues to demonstrate the potential impact of targeted development activity. Work with Wigan Warriors has contributed to sustained growth across community clubs in the area, with 1,022 players currently registered compared with 896 at the same point in 2025. Further increases are anticipated following the summer, particularly across the younger age groups.

Building on this approach, work has commenced with Wigan Warriors in West Cumbria, including coach development activity within community clubs and support for male and female participation within two secondary schools. The partnership provides an opportunity to bring additional development support and impetus into an established Rugby League area.

York City Knights have continued development activity across Harrogate, Scarborough and Selby, with mixed progress to date. Experience from this work continues to demonstrate that sustainable expansion is more achievable where there is an existing connection to Rugby League and sufficient local volunteer infrastructure to support activity.

Regional Challenges and Opportunities

While the overall Primary Rugby League position is encouraging, growth is not consistent across all regions. Registrations have reduced in London and the North East and remained broadly static in the Midlands. The withdrawal of Newcastle Rugby Foundation from Rugby League delivery presents a particular challenge for development activity in the North East.

These regional differences reinforce the importance of developing sustainable, locally rooted growth rather than relying on short-term interventions. They also demonstrate the value of using participation data to identify where additional support has the greatest potential to make a lasting difference.



Focus for the Remainder of 2026

The improved analysis of Primary Rugby League participation will increasingly be used to inform development activity. Initial work has identified opportunities across West Yorkshire, where individual community clubs could benefit from more targeted support.

There will also be a continued focus on ensuring investment through Foundation Development Plans achieves clear outcomes. Reviewing the effectiveness of funded delivery will help ensure investment is targeted appropriately and supports measurable and sustainable participation growth.

Greater sharing of local participation data with professional clubs will also help strengthen understanding of the Community Game within their areas and identify opportunities for closer collaboration.

The focus for the remainder of 2026 will therefore be on building upon areas of proven growth, targeting support using stronger data and insight, and strengthening the local infrastructure required to sustain participation over the longer term.





Social Rugby League

Social Rugby League continues to provide flexible, accessible and enjoyable opportunities for people to participate in the sport outside traditional contact competition. Through Tag, Touch and Masters Rugby League, participants can remain active, develop social connections and enjoy Rugby League in formats that support both recreational and competitive participation.

Try Tag Rugby

Try Tag Rugby (TTR) continues to operate at significant scale, maintaining participation at approximately 10,000 players for consecutive years. The programme has continued to expand geographically, with new franchise areas including Nottingham, Salford, Bournemouth and Glasgow.

Social leagues continue to attract new participants across both established and emerging locations, demonstrating the appeal of Tag as an accessible entry point into Rugby League and an opportunity for people to remain connected to the sport.

As the programme has expanded, continued attention has been given to governance, operational arrangements and the annual calendar to support participation across local leagues and central events. Access to appropriate facilities remains a challenge, particularly during winter when demand for midweek evening venues is high.

Touch Rugby League

The Foundation Touch Series is now in its fourth year. While fewer Foundations are currently delivering the programme, participation remains strong, with approximately 600 players engaged through Foundation-led activity and a further 400 players participating through community clubs.

Touch continues to demonstrate its value beyond traditional participation, with interest from organisations seeking to use the format to support mental health, weight management and social inclusion initiatives.

The National Touch programme has also evolved during 2026 through the development of a regionalised Premier Touch Charity Event format, providing greater opportunities for local engagement while maintaining a national profile.

Facility costs and availability continue to present challenges, particularly during the winter months, while volunteer capacity remains important to the sustainability of weekly activity. These areas will continue to be considered as the programme develops.



Masters Rugby League

Masters Rugby League continues to provide an important lifelong participation opportunity, with approximately 2,150 players now involved across men's and women's teams.

Activity continues to grow, with clubs delivering a varied programme of festivals and fixtures between February and November.

By mid-year, 435 Masters fixtures had been submitted for 2026, compared with 380 at the equivalent point in 2025, an increase of approximately 14%. New clubs continue to join the programme, while development activity has also extended across Wales, Ireland and Scotland.

Alongside participation growth, increased emphasis has been placed on developing the volunteer workforce supporting Masters Rugby League. Educational opportunities for Team Managers and Match Officials have helped strengthen understanding of the format and improve confidence in its delivery, with increases reported in both player numbers and Match Official recruitment.

The continued development of Tag, Touch and Masters demonstrates the importance of providing a varied Rugby League offer. These formats allow people to enter the sport in different ways, remain involved for longer and continue to experience the physical, mental and social benefits of being part of the Rugby League community.





WOMEN & GIRLS RUGBY LEAGUE

The continued growth and development of Women & Girls Rugby League remains a key priority, with work during 2026 focused on increasing participation, strengthening sustainable club and competition environments and providing clear opportunities for players to develop and progress.

The first half of 2026 has seen continued strong growth across the female game, particularly within the younger age groups. Core Community female participation has increased by 7.3% compared with mid-year 2025, including growth across Primary, Junior and Youth. Women's Open Age participation remains broadly stable, currently 0.8% below the same point in 2025.

Girls Rugby League

Girls Rugby League continues to grow, with registrations increasing by more than 9% compared with the same stage in 2025. Fourteen new clubs have participated during 2026, with particularly encouraging growth at Under-11 and Under-12, helping clubs to develop more sustainable girls' sections across multiple age groups.

The Under-18 competition has also strengthened, with two additional teams and 13 more fixtures completed than at the equivalent point last year. League and Cup competitions have continued to operate separately following positive feedback on the approach introduced in 2025.

Despite the positive participation picture, behaviour has emerged as a significant concern. A mid-season review identified 25 disciplinary cases, compared with 17 during 2025, including three abandoned fixtures. Improving behaviour and fixture fulfilment will therefore remain priorities during the remainder of the season, alongside ensuring the competition structure continues to encourage aspiration and progression.

Women's Rugby League

The Women's competition structure has continued to develop during 2026, with the Northern competition expanding through the introduction of League 3 and six new clubs entering across the wider competition structure.

Progress has also continued outside the traditional heartlands. The Midlands has operated a more consistent competition, with improved fixture completion and 13-a-side Rugby League increasingly becoming the norm. The Southern competition has reduced to four teams, although Bedford has returned and Medway Dragons have established a new women's offer.

Fixture fulfilment remains a challenge, particularly within the newly introduced Northern League 3. Work ahead of 2027 will consider how new teams can be appropriately supported into formal competition, alongside continued focus on sustainable growth in the Midlands and South.



Developing the Female Pathway

Futures and RugBees continue to support the development of the female pathway by creating opportunities for new players and helping clubs establish sustainable girls' sections.

The Futures Programme has operated across the North and South during 2026, with six clubs accessing funding in the North and ten in the South. A particular focus on Under-14 activity in the South has supported the establishment of an Under-14 league offer. As girls' Rugby League continues to grow, the programme will increasingly focus on helping clubs develop younger age groups and stronger pathways through their existing provision.

RugBees continues to provide girls aged 7–11 with an accessible introduction to Rugby League. More than 200 hours of activity have been delivered during 2026, involving 373 girls to date. Further programmes are planned during the second half of the year, alongside work to develop the programme's reach and sustainability.

The Pathway to Performance programme is now established within the girls' player pathway, providing an earlier introduction to development environments before progression into the Under-19 Academy programme. The Under-19 Academy League is also midway through its second season, with Barrow joining the competition for the first time in 2026. Work will continue to ensure that players have opportunities to enter and progress through the pathway at different stages of their development.

Supporting Players and Coaches

Work has continued to strengthen the support available to female players and coaches. A new Female Health Programme has been developed, with initial workshops covering nutrition and the menstrual cycle delivered to more than 100 participants.

Bespoke Coaching in the Female Game modules are also being developed, while three female tutors have joined the Coach Education workforce and two women-only coaching courses have been delivered during 2026.

Priorities for the Remainder of 2026

The focus for the remainder of the year will be on sustaining growth across the female game while ensuring that clubs, competitions and pathways develop sustainably. Priorities include improving behaviour and fixture fulfilment within Girls Rugby League; strengthening new and developing Women's teams; supporting growth in the Midlands and South; developing sustainable pathways through Futures and RugBees; and continuing to strengthen player and coach development opportunities.



SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY GAME

A sustainable Community Game relies on more than participation alone. Clubs need strong governance, capable and supported volunteers, appropriate facilities and access to the resources and guidance that enable them to operate effectively.

Throughout 2026, work has continued to strengthen the infrastructure that sits behind the playing offer, helping clubs respond to financial, regulatory and operational challenges while building greater resilience for the future.

Community Club Support

Community clubs continue to operate within a challenging environment. Cost pressures remain a concern, while the prolonged dry weather experienced during 2026 has created additional challenges around pitch availability and maintenance.

The RFL has continued to support affected clubs to explore alternative playing arrangements and access appropriate guidance, working alongside the Grounds Management Association (GMA) to help clubs manage the impact on their facilities.

Financial sustainability also remains an important focus, with clubs supported to identify external funding opportunities and other sources of investment, including programmes such as the Aldi Sports Fund.

Professional Club Foundations also provide support to community clubs in areas including participation growth and player pathways. Continued collaboration between the RFL, Foundations and community clubs provide opportunities to coordinate support and share good practice.

Strengthening Governance and Resilience

Supporting clubs to understand and respond to changes in legislation and regulation is an increasingly important part of club development.

During 2026, the RFL has worked alongside Sport England and other National Governing Bodies to contribute to guidance for community sports organisations ahead of the implementation of Martyn's Law (Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act). This work will help clubs, particularly those that own or manage facilities, understand their responsibilities and develop proportionate and effective security practices.

The RFL is also contributing to work with Sport England, other governing bodies and HMRC around the operation of the Community Amateur Sports Club (CASC) scheme. Areas under consideration include volunteer expenses, deregistration charges, social membership and participation requirements, helping clubs understand and navigate the scheme effectively.



Recognising and Sharing Good Practice

The RFL Community Impact & Excellence Awards have been reinstated during 2026, providing an opportunity to recognise good practice across the Community Game and celebrate the clubs and volunteers that contribute to strong and sustainable Rugby League environments.

The nomination process is now underway, with the Awards also providing an opportunity to identify and share examples of effective practice across the game.

Priorities for the Remainder of 2026

The focus during the remainder of the year will be on strengthening the resilience and capability of community clubs. This will include helping clubs respond to financial and facility pressures; improving access to external funding and guidance; preparing for emerging regulatory requirements; strengthening collaboration with Professional Club Foundations and other partners; and sharing good practice more consistently across the game.

The aim is to ensure clubs have the people, facilities, governance and resources required to provide sustainable Rugby League opportunities over the longer term.





Southern Regions Update

The Southern Regions Framework continues to provide a coordinated approach to strengthening the sustainability of Rugby League outside the traditional heartlands, recognising the different challenges presented by geography, participation density, workforce capacity and local infrastructure.

Progress has continued during 2026 in strengthening regional competition structures and creating more sustainable opportunities for players. The Midlands Men's competition is operating across two regional divisions, while changes have also been implemented across the men's game in London and the South. Alongside this, continued development of representative opportunities through the South of England Men's programme is providing players with additional playing and development experiences beyond their domestic competitions.

Strengthening Regional Infrastructure

A particular focus during 2026 has been on strengthening the infrastructure required to sustain Rugby League across the regions.

Match official provision remains an important challenge. Work through the Southern Regions Development Forum Match Officials Sub-Group has resulted in new roles being established across the Midlands and West, providing the foundations for a more coordinated approach to recruitment, retention and development. This work will continue through the development of a regional programme of opportunities ahead of the 2027 season.

Coach Education has also highlighted some of the challenges associated with delivering development opportunities across geographically dispersed areas. Several courses have been unable to proceed during 2026 where minimum candidate numbers have not been achieved. Work will therefore focus on developing a more coordinated Coach Education and Development calendar for 2027.

Building Sustainable Junior Rugby League

The continued development of Primary and Junior Rugby League in the Midlands remains an important priority. While participation has developed over recent years, numbers within individual age groups do not always support meaningful and sustainable competition.

The structure and management of activity will therefore be reviewed ahead of 2027, with the aim of creating an approach that better reflects the number of players and teams available while providing appropriate and consistent playing opportunities.

Similar work will take place across London to ensure junior competition structures and their supporting management arrangements provide a sustainable platform for future development.

Looking Ahead

The focus for the remainder of 2026 and into 2027 will be on strengthening the foundations required for sustainable regional growth. This includes improving match official provision, developing more coordinated workforce opportunities, reviewing junior competition structures and continuing to provide appropriate pathways for players.

The Southern Regions require approaches that reflect their individual circumstances rather than simply replicating models used within the traditional heartlands. The priority is therefore to establish strong local structures that can sustain participation and provide a platform for future growth.



Respect and Positive Environments

Respect remains a key priority across the Community Game. It is not simply about reducing disciplinary cases; it is about protecting Rugby League's reputation as the Family Game and creating environments where everyone feels safe, welcome and valued.

The approach is centred around four clear principles: ensuring Rugby League environments are positive, safe and inclusive, while reinforcing that Respect is everyone's responsibility.

This requires a broader focus than responding to individual incidents, with players, coaches, parents, spectators, volunteers, Match Officials, clubs and the RFL all having a role in shaping the culture of the game.

Progress and Continuing Challenges

There has been encouraging progress in reducing unacceptable behaviour over recent years. Match Official Abuse reduced from 294 incidents in 2022 to 106 in 2025, a reduction of 64%, while recorded Community Game behaviour incidents reduced from 1,010 in 2021 to 498 in 2025, a reduction of 51%.

However, behaviour remains an area requiring continued attention. Experiences across competitions during 2026 demonstrate that poor touchline behaviour, abuse of Match Officials and incidents involving players and spectators can still have a significant impact on the experience of everyone involved in the game.

The RFL continues to monitor behaviour and emerging trends across clubs and competitions, enabling targeted intervention where concerns are identified. Where standards fall below those expected, regulatory and disciplinary action is taken, with sanctions designed to provide both appropriate consequences and opportunities to improve behaviour. This includes the use of education courses alongside more traditional disciplinary sanctions. During 2026, action has also included, in the most serious cases, requiring fixtures to be played behind closed doors.

Where concerns persist, or where the seriousness of an incident warrants it, stronger action may be taken, including restrictions on a team or club's ability to participate in competition. This reinforces that providing a safe and positive environment is a condition of participation and a responsibility shared across the game.

The approach is therefore one of both prevention and accountability. Education, communication and club support are central to creating long-term cultural change, while education can also form part of the response where standards have been breached. These measures are underpinned by clear standards and meaningful consequences where behaviour is serious or repeated.



Strengthening the Respect Programme

During 2026, work has continued to refresh and strengthen the Respect programme, with the focus on making expectations clearer and ensuring Respect becomes increasingly embedded within everyday Rugby League activity.

Work is underway to refresh the Respect website and supporting resources, including club and social media assets. Greater emphasis will also be placed on bringing Respect to life through positive stories and examples from across Rugby League, alongside opportunities to involve professional clubs and influential figures within the sport in reinforcing consistent messages.

Everyone's Responsibility

Creating the right culture cannot be achieved through regulation and disciplinary processes alone. The RFL has an important role in setting standards, providing education and support and taking appropriate action where those standards are breached, but the environment experienced each weekend is created collectively.

Clubs have a particularly important role in establishing expectations for their players, coaches, parents, volunteers and spectators and intervening when behaviours fall below those expected. Coaches and volunteers are important role models, while parents and spectators have a responsibility to ensure their behaviour contributes positively to the experience of participants and Match Officials.

The focus for the remainder of 2026 and into 2027 will be on making Respect more visible, more consistently understood and increasingly embedded within the culture of the game. This will include refreshed communications and resources, continued education and club support, stronger promotion of positive behaviour and appropriate intervention where concerns arise.

Ultimately, creating positive, safe and inclusive environments is everyone's responsibility and is fundamental to ensuring players, coaches, volunteers, Match Officials and families want to remain part of Rugby League.





EDUCATION

Education continues to provide an important route into Rugby League, creating opportunities for young people to experience the sport through schools, colleges and universities while supporting progression into community clubs, performance pathways and lifelong participation.

During the 2025/26 academic year, activity has continued to develop across the education pathway, with strong engagement in schools' competitions, further growth within the female college game and continued progress across University Rugby League. Alongside playing opportunities, investment in teacher development is helping to strengthen the capacity of education institutions to deliver Rugby League independently and sustainably.

Schools Rugby League

Another successful Champion Schools season concluded at Magic Weekend, with the Year 10 Girls Final becoming the first Women's and Girls' Rugby League activity to take place at Hill Dickinson Stadium.

Almost 16,500 pupils engaged with Champion Schools activity during the year, representing an increase on the previous season. Particularly encouraging was the continued development of the girls' competition, which attracted approximately 500 additional participants, driven by both an increase in participating schools and larger squad sizes.

The national finals programme continued to provide opportunities at high-profile venues, including Wembley Stadium, Goole Vikings' Victoria Pleasure Grounds, Castleford Tigers' One Bore Stadium and Hill Dickinson Stadium. The Year 10 Girls Final has already been confirmed to return to Magic Weekend in 2027, providing an important showcase for girls' schools Rugby League.

Success was spread across the country, with schools from Yorkshire, the North West and Wales securing national titles, including a first national Rugby League title for Ysgol Plasmawr from Wales.

InspiredBy 9s

The School Games InspiredBy Rugby League 9s programme continues to provide an accessible competition for emerging teams and players, complementing the established Champion Schools offer.

Foundation-led local activity took place throughout the summer term, followed by three Northern Finals days at Victoria Park. Almost 800 young people participated across the finals, many experiencing centrally delivered Rugby League competition for the first time.

The programme continues to place a strong emphasis on sportsmanship and fair play, with recognition at the Finals focused on teams demonstrating these behaviours rather than solely on match results.



The planned Southern Finals were postponed during the early summer heatwave when temperatures reached levels considered inappropriate for activity. These will be rearranged later in the year, ensuring player welfare remains the priority.

Across all School Games 9s activity, including delivery outside funded Development Plan activity, the programme has reached approximately 7,500 participants.

College Rugby League

College Rugby League has continued to evolve to provide a broader range of appropriate playing opportunities.

Within the men's game, early-season 9s festivals were introduced to provide new teams and players with match experience in a less pressured environment. Cup competitions were also moved to the beginning of the season, helping to create a more balanced competition calendar.

Across structured and development leagues, 26 teams participated regularly during the season, with overall participation remaining broadly consistent with 2024/25.

The female college game has experienced particularly encouraging progress. Now in its fourth full season, the competition has developed into a more regular playing offer, with festivals taking place approximately every two weeks throughout the season.

The number of participating colleges increased to 14, with Kirklees College and Trinity Sixth Form joining for the first time. Player participation also increased from 165 in 2024/25 to 210 in 2025/26.

As both participation and playing standards develop, work is now focused on ensuring the competition provides appropriate opportunities for colleges with established and experienced players alongside institutions that are newer to Rugby League. Feedback from colleges and participants will inform the structure of the 2026/27 offer.

University Rugby League

University Rugby League continues to provide an important playing and development environment.

The men's BUCS National League achieved a 97% fixture completion rate, alongside improvements in playing standards supported through Match Official Society audits. Almost 1,500 players registered across the BUCS leagues during 2025/26, representing an increase on the previous academic year.

The continued development of 9s has also been encouraging, with 20 teams participating in the tiered competitions, more than double the number involved when the format was reintroduced in 2022/23.

The Women's University League completed its third season, while an important development has been the formal adoption of Women's Rugby League 9s by BUCS. The next competition will therefore become the first Women's Rugby League event delivered within the formal BUCS competition framework, representing another step forward in embedding the women's game within university sport.



Developing the Education Workforce

Alongside competition delivery, work continues to strengthen the ability of education institutions to provide high-quality Rugby League activity.

The Introduction to Teaching Rugby League course has continued to be delivered across partner universities, with all existing partners requesting repeat delivery. During the 2025/26 academic year, 300 participants across eight institutions completed the training. Professional Club Foundations have also supported the programme by providing Continuing Professional Development opportunities for existing teachers through their local education networks.

The continued development of the education offer provides an important opportunity to introduce young people to Rugby League, retain existing players through key transition points and create sustainable playing opportunities within schools, colleges and universities.

For the remainder of 2026 and into the next academic year, the focus will be on sustaining and building participation, developing appropriate competition formats for different levels of experience, strengthening the female education pathway and continuing to build the confidence and capability of teachers and education partners to deliver Rugby League.





SOCIAL IMPACT

Supporting our people and communities' remains a fundamental part of who we are and central to our ambition of being More Than a Sport. Rugby League has a unique reach into its communities, providing opportunities not only to participate in the sport but to improve lives, strengthen communities and influence wider social outcomes.

Our ambition remains to positively influence the social mobility and wellbeing of our communities through the power of Rugby League. Long-term sustainability is essential to achieving this, ensuring that clubs, Foundations and partners have the capacity and resources to continue making a difference both on and off the field.

Much of this work continues to be driven through OurLeague Life, the RFL's dedicated social impact approach, supported by the RFL Community Trust. Following its establishment in 2025, the Trust is now helping to unlock new investment and partnerships for the sport, creating opportunities to extend Rugby League's reach into areas including health and wellbeing, employment, environmental sustainability and community development. Since 2022, more than £2.5 million of additional income has been generated to support social impact initiatives across the wider sport.

During 2026, this work has continued to develop through new and existing partnerships across a diverse range of sectors. Major new investment has been secured for programmes including Try for Tomorrow, alongside continued development of Community Wellbeing Hubs and the Youth Guarantee partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions.

We also remain committed to ensuring Rugby League is accessible and inclusive, while strengthening the people, places and organisations that enable the sport to make a lasting contribution within its communities.

Our Social Impact work therefore continues to focus on three strategic strands:

1. **Tackling Inequalities** – using the reach of Rugby League to address barriers and create opportunities within our communities.
2. **Inclusive Playing Offers** – providing appropriate and accessible opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in and progress through the sport.
3. **Sustainable Growth** – strengthening club capacity, facilities and the volunteer workforce to support the long-term health and impact of Community Rugby League.

Together, these strands ensure Rugby League continues to use its position at the heart of communities to create opportunity, improve lives and deliver sustainable social impact.



Tackling Inequalities

Rugby League continues to use its reach within communities to address inequalities and create opportunities that extend beyond participation in the sport. During 2026, this work has continued to develop through partnerships and programmes focused on areas including health and wellbeing, employment, environmental sustainability and community development.

Try for Tomorrow – Tackling Climate Change

A significant development during 2026 has been the launch of Try for Tomorrow, a new climate action programme supported by more than £1.5 million from The National Lottery Community Fund.

Over the next three years, the RFL Community Trust will work with strategic community partners, including 12 Rugby League Foundations, to use the reach of the sport to encourage practical action around climate change.

The programme will engage 200 schools through educational activity focused on food, energy, transport, waste, nature and water. It will also support 100 community clubs to become more sustainable through the introduction of 'Utility Benches', providing practical resources designed to act as a catalyst for climate action within local communities.

The programme represents an important opportunity to connect environmental sustainability with everyday life and use Rugby League as a vehicle to engage communities that may not traditionally engage with climate action.

Community Wellbeing Hubs

The OurLeague Life Community Wellbeing Hub programme continues to develop, supporting community clubs to extend their impact beyond traditional Rugby League activity and respond to the needs of their local communities.

Nine clubs have now achieved Community Wellbeing Hub accreditation, with a further five targeted to achieve accreditation during the remainder of 2026.

Expanding the programme beyond the North of England remains a challenge. Engagement has taken place with clubs in the South, but no Southern club has yet achieved accreditation. Continued support will therefore be provided to interested clubs to help them work towards the required standards.

There is also increasing interest from regional Active Partners in connecting Community Wellbeing Hubs with place-based approaches, providing an opportunity to strengthen partnerships and further embed Rugby League clubs within local community networks.



Supporting Young People into Education and Employment

The partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) through the Youth Guarantee continues to develop, providing an opportunity for Rugby League to support young people aged 16–24 into education and employment.

During 2026, Hull KR Foundation became the first Rugby League organisation to establish an official DWP Youth Hub through The Nest, providing a local base through which young people can access employment and education support.

The partnership provides an important opportunity to utilise the trusted relationships and community reach of Rugby League Foundations to connect young people with services and opportunities that can support their future progression.

Supporting Women to Become Active

New investment from Sport England's Movement Fund will support the development of a physical activity programme specifically targeting women aged 30 and over.

Using a social, non-competitive Masters Rugby League format, the programme will provide women with an opportunity to become active in a welcoming environment focused on fitness, skills, social connection and wellbeing rather than competition.

Delivery will commence during the second half of 2026, with the ambition of establishing 12 sites across the country. The programme will seek to remove some of the barriers that can prevent women from engaging or re-engaging with sport by providing a flexible and accessible route into physical activity.

Looking Ahead

During the remainder of 2026, work will focus on establishing delivery for Try for Tomorrow and the new Women's Masters programme, expanding the Community Wellbeing Hub network and developing further opportunities through the DWP Youth Guarantee.

The final independent evaluation of the Inspiring Futures programme will also consider the effectiveness of using sport as a means of engaging young people at risk of involvement in crime and violence and influencing positive behaviour change.

Through these programmes, Rugby League continues to demonstrate that its role within communities extends well beyond participation in the sport. The strength of its clubs, Foundations and partnerships provides an important platform through which the game can connect with communities, tackle inequalities and create lasting social impact.





Inclusive Playing Offers

Inclusive Rugby League has continued to develop during 2026, with a focus on consolidating each playing offer, ensuring opportunities are sustainable and accessible, and supporting appropriate participation. While overall active participation is currently below the same point in 2025, the majority of the reduction is attributable to PDRL, with LDRL remaining broadly stable and a smaller reduction in Wheelchair.

Alongside the participation position, progress has continued in developing competition structures, development opportunities and greater connectivity between the different inclusive formats.

Wheelchair Rugby League

Wheelchair Rugby League is operating its most comprehensive competition structure to date. The national competition has been standardised into two divisions of eight teams, operating through traditional home-and-away fixtures, with high levels of fixture completion across the competition.

Alongside the national structure, regional competitions provide more accessible opportunities for developing teams, reducing travel and associated costs while allowing participants to play at an appropriate level.

A new National Development Division has also been established, providing new and emerging teams with a flexible introduction to the game. The emphasis is deliberately placed on participation, enjoyment and development rather than competitive outcomes, helping create a more accessible entry point into Wheelchair Rugby League.

Cup competitions have also expanded. For the first time, the Wheelchair Challenge Cup involved 16 teams, including all teams from the two national divisions. The supplementary Challenge Trophy continued to provide meaningful competition for teams outside the main Challenge Cup structure.

Together, these developments are creating a clearer range of opportunities from introductory and development activity through to national competition, while strengthening the playing environment ahead of the World Cup.

Community Integrated Care Learning Disability Super League

The Community Integrated Care Learning Disability Super League has remained broadly stable during 2026, while continuing to provide accessible regional playing opportunities alongside larger national events.

The programme combines accessible regional playing opportunities with larger national events, ensuring participants can take part regularly within appropriate environments while also experiencing some of Rugby League's major occasions.

During 2026, participants have been provided with opportunities alongside Challenge Cup Semi-Final events, while the Learning Disability Super League also returned to Magic Weekend, staged for the first time at Hill Dickinson Stadium.

These showcase opportunities remain an important part of the programme, giving participants the opportunity to represent their clubs on some of the sport's biggest stages while increasing the visibility and profile of Learning Disability Rugby League.



Physical Disability Rugby League

Physical Disability Rugby League has continued to evolve during 2026, with the focus remaining on ensuring that participation is appropriate, equitable and sustainable.

Active participation is currently below the same point in 2025, with 157 participants compared with 224. Understanding the factors behind this reduction and supporting sustainable participation will be an area of focus during the remainder of the year.

Insight from the Player Advisory Group established in 2025 has helped shape further development of the competition, including an increased focus on classified participation and changes to ratios within the Premier competition.

The domestic season is shorter during 2026, with additional focus on the international programme. The England Community Lions PDRL team will travel to Australia later in the year to defend their World Cup title, with significant work underway to develop funding opportunities and ensure the programme can operate as close to full cost recovery as possible.

The continued involvement of players in shaping the domestic offer is particularly important in ensuring that future development reflects the experiences and needs of those participating in the format.





Tryz

The Tryz programme has experienced its strongest year of growth to date, continuing to provide an accessible introduction to Rugby League for children and young people with disabilities.

A significant development during 2026 has been the expansion of Tryz beyond existing community settings, with the format increasingly adopted within Foundation delivery. This provides additional routes through which young people can experience Rugby League and strengthens connections between introductory activity and the wider inclusive game.

The programme has also delivered its first centralised event. As part of the Grand Day Out, participants from several different settings came together for the first central Tryz activation, benefiting from specialist coaching while experiencing a wider Rugby League event alongside other inclusive formats.

2026 is the final year of the programme's existing partnership arrangement, and the progress achieved provides a strong platform from which to consider its future development and sustainability.

Looking Ahead

The progress made across Inclusive Rugby League during 2026 demonstrates the value of providing different playing offers that reflect the needs, abilities and ambitions of participants, rather than adopting a single approach to disability participation.

The focus will continue to be on consolidating sustainable competition structures, increasing appropriate participation, strengthening development opportunities and creating greater connectivity between the different inclusive formats.

With established national competitions, more accessible regional and development opportunities and programmes such as Tryz providing routes into the sport, the ambition remains to ensure that disabled participants can access, enjoy, remain and progress within Rugby League in an environment appropriate to them.

Sustainable Growth

Sustainable growth requires more than increasing participation. Community clubs need the people, resources and facilities required to provide high-quality Rugby League opportunities and remain resilient in an increasingly challenging operating environment.

During 2026, work has continued to strengthen these foundations through support for volunteer recruitment and development, investment in playing facilities and initiatives that help clubs generate additional income. The focus is not simply on supporting current activity, but on building the capacity within clubs that will enable them to continue serving their communities over the longer term.



Supporting Club Sustainability

The financial pressures facing community clubs remain significant, with increasing operating and facility costs requiring clubs to identify new and sustainable sources of income.

The partnership with Easyfundraising has provided one such opportunity, generating more than £48,000 for community clubs during 2026. More than 40 clubs are now registered, enabling supporters to generate donations for their clubs through everyday online purchases at no additional cost.

The initiative provides clubs with an accessible way of generating unrestricted income that can be used according to local priorities, including equipment, reducing the cost of participation and improvements to club facilities.

Volunteering

Volunteers remain fundamental to the delivery and sustainability of Community Rugby League. At the midpoint of 2026, 6,657 volunteers were registered across the game, an increase of 7.2% compared with 2025. Growth has been particularly strong in the North West, where registrations have increased by 16%, alongside an increase of 4.3% in Yorkshire.

However, the headline growth masks an important challenge. Much of the increase has been within match-day roles required to support the safe and compliant delivery of fixtures, including Game Day Managers, First Aiders and Team Managers. At the same time, registrations have declined across a number of key club-management positions, including Club Welfare Officers, Treasurers and Secretaries.

This indicates that while more people are contributing to Rugby League overall, the operational capacity of some clubs remains under pressure. Recruiting and retaining volunteers willing to undertake the leadership, governance and administrative responsibilities required to run sustainable community clubs therefore remains an important priority.

During the 2026 pre-season, volunteer support was expanded through Club Development Plans, Health Checks and Volunteer Recruitment Plans. Online resources were refreshed, including a new volunteer recruitment guide and a process through which clubs can request bespoke support around recruitment, recognition and retention.

Engagement with these support opportunities has, however, been lower than anticipated. Understanding what support volunteers and clubs need, and how they want to access it, will therefore form an important part of future planning.

The Try Force programme has continued to provide another route into volunteering, with 574 volunteers registered. During the first half of 2026, volunteers supported 41 Rugby League events and contributed 524 hours, ranging from local schools finals through to Magic Weekend. A new hour-trade reward programme has also been introduced, allowing volunteers to receive recognition such as kit and event tickets for their contribution.



Volunteer recognition has continued through Volunteers' Week, with stories from Hindley Stags and Featherstone Rovers Foundation highlighting the difference volunteers make to clubs and communities. The Community Volunteer Awards will provide a further opportunity to celebrate these contributions later in the year.

A volunteer survey will be undertaken during the second half of 2026 to better understand the pressures volunteers face, their preferred methods of receiving support and CPD, and the reasons behind the decline in key club-management roles. The findings will inform a more accessible programme of volunteer development and recruitment support ahead of the 2027 season.

Facilities

High-quality, accessible and sustainable facilities are fundamental to the long-term health of Community Rugby League. They provide the places in which the game is played while enabling clubs to grow their activity, generate income and provide wider benefits to their communities.

Since the beginning of 2026, 384 Community Game pitches have been inspected, with 67% graded Basic and 29% graded Good. Achieving a Good standard remains the target for clubs receiving investment through the Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund.

The latest round of the Grass Pitch Maintenance Fund has now concluded, bringing investment into Community Rugby League pitches to approximately 80% of the original £5 million allocation made available in 2022.

Some clubs have been unable to access investment because of challenges including security of tenure, match-funding requirements and volunteer capacity. The RFL continues to work with clubs and partners to address these barriers where possible, with the ambition of securing further opportunities to invest the remaining funding in improving Community Game pitches.

Capital pitch improvements have also taken place at Rochdale Mayfield ARLFC and Hemel Stags, where Sport England funding has supported drainage works designed to make their main pitches more resilient throughout the year. As well as improving playing conditions, greater pitch resilience can increase site usage and provide additional opportunities for clubs to generate income.

Protecting and Developing Rugby League Facilities

Alongside direct investment, work continues to protect existing Rugby League facilities and support clubs with longer-term development ambitions.

The RFL continues to contribute to Playing Pitch Strategies and planning consultations across Local Authority areas, helping to ensure that the needs of Rugby League are represented within local planning decisions and that existing sites are protected and enhanced wherever possible.

Bespoke support is also being provided to clubs developing their facilities, including reviewing development plans, supporting fundraising strategies, providing design guidance and bringing appropriate partners together. The RFL Facilities Trust continues to provide additional support to clubs with development ambitions.



Partnership working with the Football Foundation is also progressing a number of multi-sport 3G projects within Rugby League heartland areas, which have the potential to increase access to reliable training and playing provision. Planning work has also secured off-site mitigation funding for investment into Community Rugby League facilities, with construction on some projects anticipated to begin during 2027.

Increasing operating costs are also encouraging clubs to consider the long-term sustainability of their sites. A number have invested in measures including solar panels, with the aim of reducing energy costs and reliance on mains electricity over time.

Looking Ahead

The focus during the remainder of 2026 will be on strengthening the underlying capacity of community clubs: understanding and responding to volunteer pressures, increasing engagement with development support, recognising the contribution of volunteers and continuing to improve and protect the facilities on which the game depends.

The challenge is not simply to grow the number of people participating in Rugby League, but to ensure that the clubs, volunteers and facilities supporting that participation are sufficiently strong and sustainable to meet future demand.

