

COMMUNITY RUGBY LEAGUE
**MORE THAN A
SPORT REVIEW**
MID-YEAR 2025



CONTENTS



1 Executive Summary

2 Introduction

2 - 4 Active Participant Update

5 Brain Health

6 - 12 Core Community Game Update

- Participant Growth
 - England Community Lions
 - Social RL
 - Female Participants
-

13 Sustainable Community Game

13 - 15 Sport Governance & Administration

16 Community Game Environment

17 - 18 Education

- Schools
 - Male College & Universities
 - Female College & Universities
-

19 - 24 Social Impact

- Tackle Inequalities
- Inclusive Playing Offers
- Sustainable Growth





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Highlights:

- **Participation Growth:** Overall participation in community clubs is up 1% year-on-year, with strong increases across youth age groups and inclusive formats.
- **Women & Girls:** Female participation continues to grow, with 3,580 girls and 1,606 women now active in the game. Visibility and pathways are expanding.
- **Inclusive Rugby League:** Wheelchair, Learning Disability, and Physical Disability Rugby League formats have seen double-digit growth, reinforcing the sport's commitment to accessible offers.
- **Education Engagement:** Over 16,000 pupils engaged through Champion Schools, with university participation rising and new formats introduced to support growth.
- **Social Impact:** The launch of the RFL Community Trust has united 23 Foundations and generated nearly £1million for community programmes since 2022.
- **Facilities & Volunteers:** Over £850k secured for facility improvements, and volunteer numbers have grown to 6,036, supported by the expanding Try Force programme.
- **Player Welfare:** Continued focus on brain health has resulted in insurance savings, which reflects the sport's commitment to safe and sustainable participation.
- **Governance & Future Planning:** A new vehicle to deliver Community Rugby League (The National Community Rugby League) is under development, aiming to modernise competition delivery and improve player experience nationwide.



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Mid-Year 2025 *Community Rugby League: More Than a Sport* update. This report summarises activity undertaken by the RFL Development Team between January and August 2025, providing an overview of progress, challenges, and priorities across the community game.

The Mid-Year 2025 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.

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). The mid-year reporting tends to focus on the number of participants taking part within core community clubs' settings, with more comprehensive reporting including social and education activities produced at the end of the year.

Overall, the 2025 mid-year figures are broadly the same with similar trends as those reported in 2024.



CORE COMMUNITY BREAKDOWN

CORE INDICATORS	BASELINE	YEAR 3 (23/24)		YEAR 4 (24/25)		YEAR 5 (25/26)		MID YEAR
		Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	End of Year	Mid-Year	End of Year	2024 V 2025
U7 to U11 (Primary)	12,000	13,615	14,602	13,672	14,368	14,041	0	3%
Boys		11,809	12,430	11,730	12,233	12,009		2%
Girls		1,806	2,172	1,942	2,135	2,032		5%
U12 to U15 (Junior)	9,400	11,579	11,893	12,064	12,319	12,317	0	2%
Boys		9,272	9,419	9,564	9,717	9,763		2%
Girls		2,307	2,474	2,500	2,602	2,554		2%
U16 to U18 (Youth)	4,800	5,226	5,437	4,046	4,082	4,322	0	7%
Boys		4,463	4,639	3,418	3,445	3,658		7%
Girls		763	798	628	637	664		6%
Open Age	18,099	11,085	11,492	11,993	12,205	11,422	0	-5%
Men		9,502	9,798	10,222	10,387	9,816		-4%
Women		1,583	1,694	1,771	1,818	1,606		-9%
Total (Male)	0	35,046	36,286	34,934	35,782	35,246	0	7%
Total (Female)	0	6,459	7,138	6,841	7,192	6,856	0	0%
TOTAL		41,505	43,424	41,775	42,974	42,102	0	1%



BREAKDOWN

Age:

All saw an increase compared to mid-year 2024

- Youth (+7%)
- Junior (+2%)
- Primary (+3%)

Gender:

Open Age (11,422) is down -5% compared to mid-year 2024 (11,993)

- Open Age Men (9,816) is down -4% compared to mid-year 2024 (10,222)
- Open Age Women (1,606) is down -9% compared to mid-year 2024 (1,771) - Women's Super League U19 players are now being counted within the professional game rather than community reporting.

Overall: Up 1% vs mid-year 2024 in core community club settings

CORE INDICATORS (INCLUSION)	YEAR 4 (2024)		YEAR 5 (2025)		MID YEAR
	MID YEAR	END OF YEAR	MID YEAR	END OF YEAR	2024 V 2025
PDRL	218	223	224		3%
LDRL	337	343	379		12%
WHEELCHAIR	473	504	548		16%
TOTAL	1,028	1,070	1,151		12%

Inclusion saw the largest increase in comparison to mid-year 2024, with a +12% increase.





BRAIN HEALTH UPDATE

Player Welfare, Season Structure, and Insurance

Over the past two years, Rugby League has made significant progress in prioritising player welfare and strengthening the long-term sustainability of the game. For 2025/26, the off-season and compulsory non-contact period are structured to ensure players, volunteers, and staff have time to recover while supporting brain health and overall welfare. Contact training, friendlies, and talent pathway activities will then resume ahead of the new season, providing a clear and safe transition back into full competition.

As a consequence of the changes made, the sport has achieved a £300k reduction in Public Liability insurance costs over the next two years, a remarkable milestone given the challenges faced just two years ago.

These achievements demonstrate the tangible benefits of the game's collective focus on safety, welfare, and strong governance.

Season and Non-Contact Guidelines (2025/26)

- Purpose of the Non-Contact Period (NCP): Ensures a break from full-contact rugby, supports brain health and player welfare, and allows volunteer downtime.
- Training during NCP: Clubs and coaches are encouraged to maintain touch, tag, or skills-based sessions. All tackle training, including with tackle shields or bags, is prohibited.
- Tackle height: Reduced tackle height to armpit level continues to be reinforced across all age groups.

Return to Contact and Competition Timeline (2025/26)

- January: Contact training resumes.
- February: Friendlies, representative matches, and talent pathway activities may take place.
- March–October: New season competitions run.
- Till mid-November – Opportunity for Representative Rugby.

Touch and Tag

In 2026, Touch and Tag will continue to be played for Under-6 and Under-7 and will also be introduced to the Under-8 category.



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

CORE COMMUNITY

The Community Game is the foundation of Rugby League, and in recent years the RFL and its partners have worked hard to support growth through targeted programmes, new formats, and increased investment in clubs and competitions. While there have been successes, the overall impact has not been as significant as we had hoped. Participation remains under pressure, retention continues to be a challenge, and too many players, volunteers, and officials are still having inconsistent experiences across the game.

This reality demands a bolder approach. The Game Wide Review has provided both the evidence and the opportunity to accelerate change across the Community Game. The Review highlights the need for stronger governance, more consistent delivery standards, and a cultural shift that prioritises development, enjoyment, and sustainability over short-term competitiveness.

As we move through 2025, our focus is not just on maintaining existing activity but on reshaping the foundations of the Community Game to secure long-term health. Retention, relevance, and resilience will be the drivers of future growth, supported by collaborative work with clubs, leagues, and foundations to deliver meaningful reform.

Participant Growth

A player-centred approach remains at the heart of delivery. Growth and retention are supported by appropriate localised playing offers, as well as aspirational opportunities such as representative Rugby League and showcase events. In 2025, more than 200 events will be delivered, including 30+ showcase finals designed to provide enhanced, inspiring experiences for players and supporters.

2025 Men's Open-Age Competitions Overview

At the midpoint of the 2025 season, the open-age landscape continues to present a mixed picture. While the total number of teams remains broadly consistent with last year, both registered and active players are down compared to 2024. This points to ongoing pressure on squad sizes and overall competition quality, with many clubs struggling to field full squads.

Fixture completion varies significantly by region. The National Conference League (NCL) has again achieved 100% completion, though this stability has, at times, relied on prioritising NCL fixtures above others. Improvements have been seen in the Southern Conference League (SCL) and North West Men's League (NWML), while the Yorkshire Men's League (YML) has seen a fall in fixture completion. The newly merged London & East Men's League continues to face sustainability issues, with multiple forfeits highlighting persistent challenges. The Midlands Men's League remains broadly stable, showing little change from 2024.



The introduction of a new Cup group-stage format in Yorkshire and the North West has not delivered the intended benefits. Instead of increasing meaningful fixtures, it has coincided with lower completion rates, underlining the need for further review.

Other challenges remain. Discipline continues to affect the quality and safety of matchday environments, with ongoing incidents on and off the field. The RFL is implementing clearer processes to address repeat offenders and ensure accountability at club level. Meanwhile, a shortage of qualified match officials persists, affecting competition delivery across regions. Recruitment and retention of referees remain critical priorities to ensure the integrity of fixtures.

Looking Ahead

While there are positive examples of resilience, the overall picture highlights the need for strategic reform. Declining player numbers, inconsistent fixture completion, and operational pressures reinforce the case for a new approach. The Game Wide Review is therefore driving the design of a new competition structure, introducing a pyramid system with greater regionalisation and flexibility for teams to move between divisions based on performance and sustainability.

Dialogue with clubs, leagues, and stakeholders will continue through the remainder of 2025, with the ambition to implement revised formats for the 2026 season. The RFL remains committed to engaging collaboratively with the community game to reverse the decline in participation, improve matchday experiences, and secure the long-term health of men's open-age Rugby League.

Growth Through Retention

Growth through Retention is about keeping current players involved in Rugby League for longer by ensuring that formats, competitions and environments are centred on the needs of players. It seeks to embed the principles of Player Development Leagues (PDL), create enjoyable and inclusive offers, and address the key points where players often leave the sport, such as the transition from youth to open age.

The first half of 2025 has seen encouraging progress in this area. The Lions Development Programme has continued to expand, offering alternative, non-competitive formats and development festivals which provide meaningful experiences in addition to traditional club rugby. The City of Hull & District League has remained a leader in this space, running regular development days that put the player experience first. Nationally, Primary Rugby League at Under 6 and Under 7 is now firmly embedded as a Tag Rugby format, ensuring a safe and engaging introduction to the game.

The Game Wide Review refresh has also begun to make an impact. A new Competition Sub-Group has developed recommendations to reshape competitions, calendars and playing formats with retention and player development at the centre.

There is evidence of significant progress on the ground. More than 220 coaches have participated in Primary Rugby League workshops, while 25 coaches engaged in a "Play Their Way" workshop, delivered in partnership with Sport England, UK Coaching, and UNICEF, to promote a child-first coaching philosophy.



Over 350 players attended the National Primary Rugby League Festival at Gunnersbury Park ahead of the Challenge Cup Final, and more than 3,800 players have already taken part in Lions Development Programme activity, with this figure expected to rise as further data is received from Foundations. In Lancashire, the Wigan Warriors-led growth project has seen 18 new teams established since 2022, with 896 registered players across the clubs, and more are expected to join later in the year.

However, progress has not come without challenges. Changing long-held practices in some leagues remains difficult. For example, the pilot in the Yorkshire Junior League at Under 6 and Under 7 revealed resistances to flexible delivery, with governance requirements sometimes acting as barriers to new teams entering the game. While such controls are often well-intentioned, in the youngest age groups, deregulation may be necessary to make participation as easy as possible.

Looking ahead to the second half of the year, oversight of the Lions Development Programme will be tightened, with greater emphasis on reporting and quality standards among delivery partners. Work will also continue to refine non-contact playing opportunities, including the introduction of “Chaos Player Development Festivals” and a pilot of two-player tackle rules in junior rugby.

Alongside these initiatives, there is a need to strengthen direct communication with players and parents, while embedding a culture of fun and respect through the ongoing RESPECT plan.

England Community Lions

The England Community Lions programme continues to provide aspirational playing opportunities that retain and develop participants. By offering representative pathways, including international fixtures and structured training, the programme enhances player motivation, engagement, and skill development while connecting communities across the UK.

In 2025, the programme engaged over 900 nominated players, with more than 600 attending trials and 125 earning the chance to represent their country at community and university levels. Key achievements include the England Universities Men’s team retaining the Men’s Presidents Cup and Student Four Nations trophies, the U18 team defending the Four Nations title, and U16 and U17 Regional teams competing in close fixtures against Sud Provence, France. The Physical Disability Rugby League (PDRL) squad is preparing for home-and-away matches against Wales, and the Women’s programme is set to commence with 60 players competing in U21 and open-age matches.

The programme also supports coaches through initiatives such as the Energise Programme, providing development opportunities alongside experienced Lions coaches, with 20 participants so far. Clubs hosting matches benefit financially through entrance fees and sales, and community support from families and volunteers remains strong. Halton Farnworth Hornets, Featherstone Lions, and Rochdale Mayfield were key hosts for this year’s fixtures.



Despite these successes, challenges persist. Financial burdens from travel and training remain significant for some participants, and the absence of a national stadium creates logistical pressures for training and matches. Innovative measures, such as hosting trials in London to support players affected by the London Broncos Academy closure, have helped mitigate these issues.

Social media presence continues to grow, expanding the programme's reach and engagement. Across platforms, the Lions achieved over 1.7 million views and 148,000 engagements in July alone, reflecting the programme's growing profile and the importance of representative rugby league in inspiring players, clubs, and communities.

Participant Growth Initiatives

Participant Growth is focused on bringing new people into Rugby League by targeting areas where participation has either stagnated or where there is clear growth potential. This includes rebuilding the game in traditional heartland areas, expanding into new communities, and working with Foundations and delivery partners to make the sport more accessible, inclusive and appealing to under-represented groups.

The first half of 2025 has seen strong progress on this front. A new framework has been developed to identify and support both stagnating and emerging areas. In the North East, despite the wider challenges of local politics and instability, participation has increased, and a pilot adult competition has been introduced. The Lancashire project, led by Wigan Warriors, has been especially successful, with 18 new teams created since 2022 and player numbers rising from 673 to 961 across the clubs they support. In North Yorkshire, York's project to establish new clubs in Selby and Harrogate has made progress, although volunteer recruitment remains a significant hurdle. Beyond the traditional club setting, a new partnership with StreetGames is piloting Rugby League in youth organisations, opening up new pathways into the sport.

Twenty-seven Foundations are currently active as delivery partners, spanning every major region including the North East, North West, Cumbria, Yorkshire, the Midlands, London and the South. A robust review process for funded partners has been embedded and applied to York, Wigan and Newcastle Thunder, with lessons learned being shared across the network to support improved delivery.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. Recruiting and retaining volunteers continues to be a limiting factor, particularly when establishing new clubs in emerging areas.

The second half of 2025 will therefore focus on consolidating and scaling progress. The new review process will be rolled out more consistently, with Foundations held accountable for delivery against Sport England and More Than a Sport objectives. Work in the North East and Cumbria will be deepened, with Wigan Warriors providing additional support where required. If the early results of the StreetGames pilot prove sustainable, plans will be made to expand the model into other locations. At a national level, growth projects will be embedded into a coordinated framework, linking with programmes such as Rugbees, Social Touch, the Lions Development Programme, Inspired by 9s and Primary Rugby League. By the end of the year, one-to-one accountability meetings with Foundations will also begin, ensuring that delivery is both consistent and impactful.



SOCIAL RUGBY LEAGUE

Social Rugby League continues to diversify playing opportunities, helping participants develop skills, extend their playing careers, and reduce risks associated with contact formats.

Tag Rugby

Try Tag Rugby (TTR) has grown nationally, with expansion into Salford, York, and Newcastle, and ambitions to move into Wales. To date, 10,644 players have participated in 2025. While London participation remains strong, changing work and family commitments have affected the frequency of play. The RFL also piloted a Year 7 & 8 Mixed Tag Schools Event in Manchester, engaging new participants.

Touch Rugby

The Foundation Touch Series is now in its third year, with 17 foundations delivering weekly sessions to 1,110 players, supported by additional club participation. Touch continues to provide a route for clubs to attract new players, volunteers, and coaches, as well as opportunities for progression into the contact game.

Masters

Masters Rugby League has maintained participation above 2,000 for the third year running. Effective festival planning has reduced cancellations, and the England Masters Lionhearts plan fixtures against Ireland and potentially another nation in 2025. Women's Masters continues to grow, with six festivals planned and record attendance expected. Rising facility and medical costs remain a challenge.

X-League

X-League continues to be delivered with seven active clubs and attending Grand Prix events. Geographic spread remains a challenge, but clusters around Warrington, Oldham, Rotherham, and Oxford provide growth potential. A school pilot in Oxford engaged 70 pupils and 20 sports leaders, blending playing and coaching experiences.





INCREASE THE NUMBER OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

Girls Growth Programmes

Futures

The Futures Programme has been delivered across three regions in 2025: the South, Midlands, and targeted clubs in the North. Seed funding has been provided to participating clubs to grow and sustain opportunities for girls in these areas. In the Midlands and South, 112 participants are registered across nine clubs, while the North has 84 participants across five clubs. Final reporting numbers are expected within the next four weeks once all activity concludes. The main challenge has been securing commitment to playing opportunities, both for hosts and participants. Feedback is currently being collected separately for the North and South/Midlands, with meetings planned with all participating clubs before decisions are made about the next iteration of delivery. Early plans in the North involve integrating Futures into the pathway for entry-level clubs, while in the Midlands and South, post-season feedback will guide the programme towards a structured girls' league with regular fixtures and pathway activity. Teams are also being signposted to Development Leagues, giving them opportunities to progress from training to playing at their own pace.

RugBees

The RugBees programme, aimed at girls aged 7–11, continues to deliver sessions as part of Foundations' Development Plans. The sessions provide an introduction to rugby league in a comfortable and age-appropriate environment. A coach workshop held at Leeds Rhinos in February involved 10 clubs sharing good practice. The programme is generating a new player pool to feed into community teams. To date, 2,205 participations have occurred, and over 260 hours of sessions have been delivered. Challenges include exploring delivery by Community Clubs or Foundations outside the Development Plan system and updating resources to ensure sessions remain relevant and engaging.





Women's Rugby League

In the Women's Rugby League, the Northern League 2 has seen growth from six to eight teams, playing in a home-and-away format. Across the Midlands and South, more teams are now participating in structured competitions, including expansion to 13-a-side for some clubs and a central-venue 11-a-side league. A new cup format was introduced in the North for teams not involved in the Women's Challenge Cup, providing additional competitive opportunities. Challenges include adapting to the WSL U19s programme, which affects player availability, addressing late postponements due to low player numbers, and improving match official appointments, communication, and off-field standards. Clearer processes for postponed games and greater club accountability are being prioritised.

Girls Rugby League

The Girls Rugby League has seen a significant increase in registered and active participants, with 16 new clubs and 26 new teams joining across age groups, including the introduction of an Under-15s Premier Division. Challenges include a rising number of postponed or cancelled games, increasing discipline and behavioural issues leading to suspensions and fines, and lower player numbers in the Under-18s division. While the Under-19s programme has added positively to the pathway, it has also created pressures on community clubs as players are transferred. Work is ongoing to align Futures and Girls League programmes, implement stricter rules on fixture postponements, and support clubs with recurring discipline issues.

Coaching

In Coach Development, bespoke modules for coaching in the female game have been developed for both current and newly qualified coaches. Recruitment of new staff to lead coach education across the North West and Yorkshire regions is expected to significantly advance development in the coming months. Two women-only coaching courses have already been completed, with further courses planned for the second half of 2025.

Media Coverage

Finally, media coverage continues to grow, with the Women's Rugby League social channels attracting over 9,000 followers across Instagram and TikTok. Individual players are also increasing their social media presence, bringing new audiences to the sport. Updates related to college and university engagement are included in the Education section.



SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY GAME

Despite financial pressures and a challenging economic climate, community clubs continue to adapt and deliver opportunities for local players and families. Foundations are providing direct support, with initiatives such as volunteer training, kit donations, and resource-sharing, strengthening the network. Clubs are also innovating, for example, youth boards and employability projects linking sport with wider community development.

Affordability, volunteer recruitment, and communication remain key challenges. Greater visibility and promotion of club value will remain priorities for the second half of 2025.

SPORT GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

National Community Rugby League (NCRL)

The RFL is introducing the National Community Rugby League (NCRL) ahead of the 2026 season—a unified structure that brings together all community competitions from U12 to Open Age, encompassing boys, girls, men, and women.

Aims of the NCRL:

- Deliver change, eliminating the 'win at all costs' mentality, improving touchline behaviours
- Embed playing opportunities and competition offers that better suit the needs of participants
- Introduce a greater focus on player and coach development
- Achieve greater consistency in the way the game is delivered, reducing regulation where appropriate
- Embed a more varied playing calendar, maximising the available playing time through a mix of playing opportunities
- More localised activity, reducing the financial burden on clubs, participants and parents
- Ensure more accessible player development pathways open to all - accessible by more players for longer
- Improve the number and availability of match officials



Primary Rugby League will be removed from the competition framework to reflect the development focus of these age groups, where participation, fun, and skill development take priority over formal competition.

All will be delivered through a new, strong, recognisable brand delivering community rugby league.

For clubs, this means less bureaucracy, clearer processes, safer matchday environments, and stronger volunteer support. The NCRL will empower local delivery while ensuring consistent national standards.





Southern Regions Update

At the start of 2025, the Southern Regions Development Forum (SRDF) implemented key changes by replacing the four Regional Development Forums with bespoke Focus Groups. This shift aims to provide more efficient and targeted support for specific areas and objectives. Alongside this structural change, the SRDF refreshed its Southern Regions Strategic Framework and is actively delivering the two-year Action Plan for 2025–26, while beginning to consider strategic objectives for 2027 and beyond.

Participation across Southern community rugby remains steady, with three regions already meeting the 2024 baseline participation figures. Notably, the London Junior League has experienced strong growth, increasing registrations by 17% so far in 2025. The Girls Futures Programme registrations have more than doubled compared to 2024, signalling positive momentum in female participation. Growth continues in school-based programmes as well, with the Champion Schools and InspiredBy 9s initiatives seeing approximately 10-20% increases in boys' and girls' teams.

Coaching development has seen significant successes, with multiple UKCC Level 2 courses delivered in the London & South East region, including a wheelchair coaching course that qualified over 30 coaches. However, challenges remain in the Midlands, where some planned courses did not run due to insufficient attendees. To address this, earlier planning and promotion for 2026 courses are being considered. Additionally, pilot direct assessment pathways have been introduced in the West of England to help more coaches gain qualifications in areas where courses have previously been limited.

Some clubs, particularly those with Open Age Men's teams, continue to face fragility and require bespoke off-season support and development programmes to strengthen their sustainability. Recognising ongoing concerns around the availability, quality, and stability of Match Officials, the SRDF appointed Ben Thaler to lead efforts in this area. A newly formed working group is focused on improving match official management, recruitment, retention, and development through targeted workshops and initiatives.

Overall, participation levels are stable with encouraging pockets of growth alongside challenges that require ongoing attention. While incremental improvements to the sport's infrastructure in the South are evident, continued and focused support is essential to address the fragility of some clubs, coaching capacity, and match official shortages, thereby sustaining long-term development.



COMMUNITY GAME ENVIRONMENTS - RESPECT, DISCIPLINE, AND BEHAVIOURAL STANDARDS

The Respect programme remains a central pillar in creating a safe, enjoyable, and inclusive environment across Community Rugby League. Reinforced by the Game-Wide Review, the campaign is designed to improve standards both on and off the field through proactive education, consistent accountability, and clear expectations for all stakeholders.

Campaign Objectives:

- Promote positive touchline behaviour from all involved: players, coaches, parents, and spectators.
- Provide clear and enforceable codes of conduct across all settings.
- Support match officials through respect, protection, and fair treatment.
- Strengthen club environments by embedding values-led leadership and responsibility.
- Drive long-term culture change in how Rugby League is experienced and perceived.

Following the RFL's Respect and Discipline communication to all Community Clubs in May 2025, significant disciplinary action has been undertaken to uphold these objectives and address rising concerns about conduct.

Disciplinary Action and Oversight

Since the last report:

- Multiple team suspensions were issued for serious misconduct, including on-field brawls, spectator abuse, and safeguarding breaches.
- Some clubs were reinstated under strict conditions, such as playing behind closed doors or committing to behaviour improvement plans.
- The RFL has used Temporary Suspension Orders and accelerated case reviews to manage high-risk incidents.

A more robust approach to discipline is now in place, including:

- Whole-club responsibility frameworks — discipline data is now reviewed at club level, not just per team.
- Enhanced code of conduct enforcement for all roles in the game.
- Improved discipline data management to identify and address systemic patterns.

Education and Culture Change

To complement sanctions, the RFL continues to expand support and education, including:

- Delivery of Game Day Manager training across all age groups and formats.
- Promotion of positive case studies from clubs demonstrating improved conduct and leadership.
- Enhanced visibility and compliance checks, including secret shopper monitoring of matchday behaviour and technical areas.

The vast majority of clubs remain fully committed to the Respect agenda, with strong examples of clubs taking ownership to improve environments. This balanced approach — combining education, accountability, and recognition — remains critical in achieving long-term change.



EDUCATION

Education plays a crucial role in attracting new participants and providing opportunities for those who may never get to experience the sport.

Schools

The 2024–25 school season concluded in early July, following activity across six competing regions that began in September 2024. Across all Champion Schools activities, more than 16,000 pupils engaged with the competition. The format of the National Rounds for boys was adjusted, reducing the number of teams in Round 1 by giving byes into the quarter-final stages for the top two seeds, while progression into the national stages for teams in the North East was removed due to previous performances and withdrawals. Participation numbers showed a slight increase from 2023–24, with some regions recording growth while others experienced a decline. Challenges around staff cover and transport costs appear to have influenced this fluctuation. To address this, changes to the regional structure in the North West and Yorkshire are under consideration, aiming to improve local provision while reducing regional commitments and travel for schools. An entry fee will be introduced for the 2025–26 season to offset rising competition delivery costs.

The Champion Schools national finals were primarily held at the DIY Kitchens Stadium, Wakefield Trinity, except for the Year 7 boys and Year 10 girls finals. In the Year 11 boys final, St Benedict's High School (Cumbria) faced Bridgewater High School (Warrington), with St Benedict's claiming the title via a drop goal in Golden Point extra time. The girls' final saw St Peter's Catholic High School (Wigan) defeat Castleford Academy (Wakefield) to claim their first-ever title. Wembley Stadium hosted the Year 7 boys Steven Mullaney Memorial game, where Rainford High School (St Helens) produced a dominant performance to beat Sirius Academy West (Hull) without conceding a point. The Year 10 girls' final was played standalone at Headingley Stadium, Leeds, where Archbishop Sentamu Academy (Hull) overcame The Deanery School (Wigan) to take the title. Archbishop Sentamu Academy featured in four of the six finals across Year 7 to 10, demonstrating their strength, while Bedford High School (Leigh) secured both Year 9 titles, and Ysgol Glantaf avenged their previous Year 8 final defeat to St Peter's (Wigan), ensuring one of the titles went to Wales.

The emerging schools programme, “Inspired By 9s,” delivered locally by Foundations and strategic community club partners, continued to provide opportunities for players outside core areas. The North and South finals were held at Victoria Park and Hemel Stags, respectively. The tiered format of the finals was maintained, with the top team in each Round 2 group recognised and rewarded, while the trophy was reserved for the team demonstrating the best sportsmanship. With some Foundations yet to report their full activity, the overall reach of the programme is currently around 5,500 participants.





Male: College and University

At the college level, a new competition—the Supplementary Cup—was introduced for teams outside the Premier Division. The Premier play-off final at Rochdale Mayfield saw Hopwood College defeat Castleford Tigers Development Academy, while Hopwood also secured the Cup final at Huddersfield Giants' impressive facilities by beating Cronton College. Hull FC claimed the inaugural Supplementary Cup by defeating Cymoedd College (South Wales). Regional leagues were won by Cronton in the North West and Hull KR Development Academy in Yorkshire. In the South, the County College 9s event featured four teams for the third consecutive year. Overall, 455 players were registered in 2024–25, a decline of over 100 from the previous year. A new format is proposed for 2025, introducing 9s competitions to attract new players and institutions.

At the university level, there was a significant shift in the BUCS national titles, with Northumbria University failing to claim the title for the first time since 2016. The University of Nottingham defeated Liverpool John Moores in the National Trophy final, while Leeds Beckett University overcame Northumbria in the National Championship final, ending their nine-year streak. Northumbria did, however, claim both the 9s Championship and Trophy titles. The inaugural BUCS National League achieved a 100% fixture completion rate and improved competitive balance, with discussions ongoing about expanding to eight teams. The National tier improved lower league competitions by allowing evenly matched teams to compete. A total of 1,034 participants registered from BUCS leagues, an increase of 80 from the previous year. Eight institutions delivered Match Official courses, creating 40 new officials. The Introduction to Teaching Rugby League course continued to expand, with over 300 students trained across 10 institutions in 2024–25.

Female: The Women's University League

In its third full season, the college competition for girls evolved with a more established calendar of events. Player numbers slightly decreased to 165 in 2024–25 from 180 the previous season, but the quality of games and players improved. Colleges and participants were surveyed to optimise the programme for the coming season. The League Final at DIY Kitchens Stadium saw Priestley College overcome Halifax Panthers Academy, despite Halifax maintaining their record of reaching every final. Priestley benefited from the inclusion of several Women's U19 Academy players from North West WSL teams, reinforcing the quality of talent emerging from club pathways.

At university, the Women's University league continued to be fully supported by the RFL. Alongside the Winter League, 9s tournaments opened and closed the women's season, with the first event at Castleford Panthers and the final at the University of Liverpool. Northumbria 1s dominated the league, winning both 9s tournaments and the play-off final at Dewsbury, finishing the season unbeaten and claiming their second Women's Winter League title. Participation increased to 205 players, with Northumbria University supporting two teams. The league also demonstrated significant social impact; for example, University of Manchester player Najwa Fadzil, a practising Muslim from Malaysia, credited rugby league with positively influencing her life while balancing faith and studies.



SOCIAL IMPACT

Supporting our people and communities is a fundamental part of who we are. This commitment contributes directly to our overarching ambition of being More Than a Sport—creating meaningful and measurable impact by improving lives and influencing broader social outcomes.

We aim to positively influence the social mobility of our communities through the power of Rugby League. Long-term sustainability is essential for the sport to continue serving as a catalyst for individual and community transformation—both on and off the field. Key enablers in this mission include growing and supporting our volunteer workforce and enhancing the quality and accessibility of club facilities.

Much of our delivery in this area is driven through OurLeague Life, the RFL's dedicated social impact brand. In 2025, we are further strengthening this work through the launch of The RFL Community Trust, which will help unlock new funding opportunities and deepen our community reach.

We continue to work towards becoming a more inclusive sport by expanding our disability playing offers and striving to ensure clubs are more reflective of the communities they serve. Diversity, representation, and access are at the heart of this ambition.

To deliver this agenda, the RFL's Social Impact work is focused on three strategic strands:

1. **Tackling Inequalities** – addressing barriers to participation and opportunity in underserved communities.
2. **Inclusive Playing Offers** – expanding access through wheelchair, PDRL, LDRL, and other adapted formats.
3. **Sustainable Growth** – investing in club capacity, facilities, and volunteers to secure long-term impact.

This work underpins our identity as a sport rooted in community, committed to social change, and focused on leaving a lasting legacy.



TACKLING INEQUALITIES

The first half of 2025 has been a landmark period for Rugby League's social impact journey, marked by the official registration of the RFL Community Trust with the Charity Commission in February. The Trust provides a dedicated charitable vehicle to expand the sport's ability to influence social change and is closely aligned with the Governing Body and the 34 Rugby League Charitable Foundations (CCOs). All are connected by OurLeague Life, Rugby League's social impact brand, which unites delivery partners and influential stakeholders to maximise the sport's impact in communities. The Trust operates with a CIO Foundation Constitution, overseen by a Board of Trustees, with the Foundation Sustainability Network now serving as the Operations Board for OurLeague Life.

The Trust has already become a focal point for collaboration across the charitable foundation network, which meets quarterly at Foundation Forums. A key achievement has been securing 23 Foundations that have submitted evidence against the 21 Minimum Standards required to partner with the Trust, ensuring readiness for future consortium programmes. This provides the sport with a powerful new platform for securing investment and scaling up community delivery.

In 2025, the Trust has also secured two important new partnerships with Easy Fundraising and Raise Your Game, which provide fresh income generation opportunities for community clubs and organisations. These build on an already diverse partnership portfolio, including Community Integrated Care, Access Sport, The Youth Endowment Fund, Tempo Time Credits, Veterans Foundation, Grass Maintenance Association, AXA XL Insurance, and SCL Education Group. With these additions, Rugby League has already met its 2030 target of 10 active partnerships, five years ahead of schedule.

The financial impact is significant. In 2025 alone, £146,038 of additional income has been generated through the Youth Endowment Fund's Inspiring Futures programme, with £1million, 434 generated since 2022 to support social impact programmes across Rugby League communities. Alongside this, the Community Wellbeing Hubs initiative continues to grow, with nine accredited clubs to date, including new accreditation for Thatto Heath Crusaders in 2025.

With 31 more clubs expressing interest, the sport is on track to exceed the 2030 target of 30 accredited hubs.

The RFL has also delivered a range of targeted programmes across 2025. The Lead the Game programme, delivered in partnership with the Veterans Foundation, concluded in March after engaging 21 veterans on pathways into officiating and community engagement. Although recruitment proved challenging, the initiative provided valuable support for veterans' mental health, employability, and local connections. In education, Inspiring Futures concluded its delivery phase in July, reaching 114 schools through 11 Foundations and providing mentoring sessions to at-risk young people, with an independent evaluation due in 2026. Meanwhile, the Tackle Our Life employability programme launched with Leeds Rhinos Foundation as the pilot, providing qualifications, skills training, and personal development for young people in areas of deprivation.



Social justice remains a core strand of work, with the We're on the Same Team education programme continuing to tackle bullying, prejudice, and discrimination. In 2025, 51 schools, community clubs, and Foundations accessed the resource, while York RLFC Foundation secured over £27,000 in funding to deliver the programme to more than 6,000 young people across 24 locations.

Looking ahead, the focus will be on building visibility, sustainability, and scale. Plans are underway to deliver the first Week of Social Impact in 2025, providing a showcase of the sport's community initiatives, alongside the production of new case studies such as Inspiring Futures. The first meeting of the RFL Community Trust Board of Trustees will take place in September, setting the direction for the next phase of growth. Further partnerships will be pursued with specialist organisations, including Parkinson's UK, Alzheimer's Society, Gamble Aware, and RL Cares, helping to strengthen expertise and extend the sport's social reach.

Through the RFL Community Trust and OuRLeague Life, Rugby League continues to demonstrate that it is more than a sport—using its reach, identity, and values to generate meaningful social impact and leave a lasting legacy in communities across the country.





INCLUSIVE PLAYING OFFERS

Following a decline in 2024 participation within Physical Disability Rugby League (PDRL) and Learning Disability Rugby League (LDRL), linked to the introduction of stricter governance around appropriate disabled participation, 2025 has seen considerable growth. The renewed focus on ensuring players have relevant impairments has helped attract more participants for whom these formats are designed. Wheelchair Rugby League continued to grow throughout this period, maintaining its position as the fastest-expanding inclusive offer. The year began with a Disability Season Launch event at the Hilton, Manchester, attended by over 100 players, coaches, and representatives from all PDRL, LDRL, and Wheelchair Super League and Championship clubs. Interviews and imagery captured on the day have been used to promote the inclusive game throughout the year.

Physical Disability Rugby League (PDRL) has achieved 100% fixture completion under the classified participant minimum numbers in its elite division. The introduction of the Medequip Cup Series has created a new domestic regional representative competition for classified players, which also includes teams from other nations, broadening development opportunities. The competition began on 11 August and will feature further fixtures at Headingley and Goole Recreation Ground. Planning is also underway for PDRL involvement in the 2026 Rugby League World Cup. Internationally, the England PDRL side recorded a convincing win away against Wales.

Learning Disability Rugby League (LDRL) has continued to focus on developing participants' game understanding to ensure safe and enjoyable involvement. A key strand of work this year has been converting CPD materials into online resources, enabling seasonal updates and improved accessibility for coaches and support staff.

Wheelchair Rugby League has delivered the largest and most consistent participation opportunities across the inclusive pathway, with only one forfeited match so far this season. Registration numbers for both players and teams have reached record levels, reinforcing the strength and stability of the format.

The Tryz Programme has expanded into more traditional Rugby League heartlands in 2025, with multiple community foundations delivering sessions to young people with a range of impairments. This provides an impactful introduction to the sport and supports progression into impairment-specific offers where appropriate. Upshot reporting shows over 100 new young disabled participants have already engaged, with figures continuing to rise. Work with Access Sport is ongoing to monitor and track participation growth.



SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Facilities Update

Since January 2025, a combined investment of £350,000 has been secured for two major pitch improvement projects at Hemel Stags and Rochdale Mayfield, alongside a further £502,521 committed towards grass pitch improvements nationally. More than 500 individual requests for National Governing Body contributions have been completed across planning applications, Local Football Facility Plans (LFFPs), and Playing Pitch Strategies, ensuring the sport's long-term safeguarding and strategic growth nationwide. The RFL has also worked in collaboration with other National Governing Bodies to campaign for positive sector-wide changes, including lobbying on the implications of Biodiversity Net Gain requirements for sports infrastructure projects and opposing the proposed removal of Sport England as a statutory consultee on planning applications relating to playing fields. In addition, several volunteer upskilling and networking events have been delivered in partnership with the Grounds Management Association (GMA).

However, the facilities landscape is not without challenges. The proposed removal of Sport England's statutory consultee status poses a significant risk to the sport's ability to influence and protect playing field provision. Clubs continue to face pressure around adequate facilities to support the growth in women's and girls' participation, particularly in changing provision and toilet facilities. At some sites, public access has led to vandalism, limiting opportunities to improve grass pitches, while a lack of security of tenure is preventing developments even where clubs have funding in place. Hot weather and extended dry spells have resulted in hard playing surfaces and cancelled fixtures, with many clubs lacking the infrastructure or resources to irrigate pitches effectively.

Looking ahead to the second half of 2025, a community game facility survey will be conducted to capture club ambitions and bring new projects into the pipeline, addressing key issues such as pitch capacity and ancillary provision. Work will continue with sector partners to respond to changes in planning consultation processes, while encouraging clubs to adopt environmentally sustainable facility solutions. More community club network meetings will be delivered with a focus on facility development, and targeted support will continue to help clubs access grant funding and improve the quality and sustainability of the places they play.





Volunteering

Volunteers remain at the heart of the Community Game, providing the foundation that enables clubs, competitions, and events to thrive. In 2025, the RFL will focus on strengthening volunteer recruitment, retention, and recognition, while beginning to address challenges around sustainability and diversity.

Working in partnership with Greater Manchester Moving, a new volunteer recruitment project was launched to explore the use of CPD as a hook to attract new volunteers into community clubs. Three clubs were supported with funding to help them recruit and train volunteers, providing an early model for how learning and development can drive engagement.

The central volunteer programme, Try Force, has continued to expand, with 538 registered volunteers contributing to 42 events so far in 2025. This programme has become an essential part of both community and central Rugby League delivery, offering flexible and impactful ways for people to give their time.

During Volunteers' Week, the RFL shared a series of case studies showcasing the benefits of volunteering and best practice in recruitment. Stories included the Brentwood Eels' strategic approach to volunteer recruitment and Phil Glover's personal journey as a volunteer, both of which highlighted the value and impact volunteers bring to the game. Alongside this, the RFL website continues to develop as a hub for volunteer resources and guidance.

There are now 6,036 registered volunteers within the Community Game, representing a 4.3% increase on this time last year. Despite this positive growth, challenges remain. Many individuals continue to take on multiple roles within their clubs, creating a risk of burnout, and further work is needed to diversify the volunteer workforce to better reflect the communities Rugby League serves.

Looking ahead to the remainder of 2025, priorities include expanding volunteer resources through the new RFL Education Platform, providing targeted recruitment support to vulnerable clubs in the Midlands and South, and developing initiatives to encourage more young people to volunteer. The Community Volunteer Awards will also be refined and relaunched to celebrate the sport's most dedicated volunteers, while the Try Force programme will play a key role in supporting the delivery of major events at the end of the year.





25