

## RFL GENDER PARTICIPATION POLICY - FAQs

These Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) have been put together to assist in understanding the RFL Gender Participation Policy ([https://www.rugby-league.com/uploads/docs/TransgenderPolicy2022\\_RH.pdf](https://www.rugby-league.com/uploads/docs/TransgenderPolicy2022_RH.pdf)), please read the Policy to ensure full context is understood.

### SUMMARY

The RFL is committed to transgender inclusion within the sport; the introduction of an eligibility criterion within the female game is a position within the Policy that has not been taken easily. However, the current peer-reviewed research available provides sufficient evidence that the physical differences between biological males and biological females and any retained advantages is significant. Ultimately, the balance of factors, which include fairness and the safety of all players, is decisive and is a recognised priority. It is important to highlight that the eligibility criteria only refers to contact Rugby League.

At present, there are no credible tests that can assess physiological variables (e.g. mass, strength and power) for the purposes of measuring fair competition or safety when comparing players. The same issue is true for identifying a marker for at which a measurement point/threshold for each variable can be set. The inability to currently identify and conduct valid and reliable tests means that the case-by-case approach is not a current viable option and may actually increase liability concerns rather than alleviate them.

The RFL are committed to lobbying and engaging with the IRL and other organisations to undertake further research and explore options to allow wider participation in contact Rugby League. We are also committed to the ongoing review of the policy as new evidence, research and insight becomes available.

Please note, several of these FAQs have been taken and/or adapted from guidance resources from Sport England/Sports Councils' Equality Group (SCEG).

Please visit the relevant websites to access these resources and more information.

[Sport England Information](#)      [SCEG Guidelines & Resources](#)

Should these FAQs not answer your question, please contact [Ben.Abberstein@rfl.co.uk](mailto:Ben.Abberstein@rfl.co.uk) to ask us a question directly.

### REVIEW & CONSULTATION

#### Why did you carry out this review?

Following the publication of the SCEG guidelines in September 2021, the RFL as the National Governing Body for the sport of Rugby League, we recognised the need to review our own existing policy. We therefore undertook an extensive review and consultation process.

#### How did the review and consultation work?

An extensive review was carried out which included a consultation process using several different methods alongside the review of peer-reviewed public studies. The consultation included engagement sessions with key external stakeholder groups, internal RFL sessions that included Executive and Board Members, the Inclusion Board and the Clinical Advisory Group. Consultees were a mix of individuals, organisational representatives, current and former players, people from the LGBTQ+ community, advocacy groups and other specialist groups and other contact/collision sports. We then then considered all the available evidence, guidelines, consultation feedback before reaching the final proposal.

#### What did the review of published studies find?

The review of published, peer-reviewed studies concluded that there are retained advantages in strength, stamina and physique between the average transgender person assigned male at birth (who has passed through puberty and adolescence), and the average female. Current research indicates that testosterone suppression does not negate this physical advantage over females and so cannot guarantee competitive fairness and/or safety.

The SCEG group emphasise that inclusion of trans people assigned male at birth in female contact sport cannot be balanced against considerations of safety and fairness. Therefore a 'precautionary approach' to ensure fair

competition and the safety of competitors. More specifically, 'due to developmental changes brought about by male puberty, it is appropriate and necessary to maintain a female only category of contact Rugby League as well as certain eligibility requirements for male categories from the Under 12 age grade upwards and continuing into the adult game'.

See the Research section of this FAQ document for more information.

### **What did the consultation find?**

The consultation highlighted the polarised opinions and the complexity of the topic. There was general agreement that Rugby League should be as inclusive as possible and that the Rugby League community is largely a supportive and welcoming place for everyone in society, including for people who are transgender. However, it also highlighted the concerns surrounding transgender women in the female game in relation to safety and fairness. There was no consensus on a single solution as to how this should be addressed.

## **LANGUAGE & TERMINOLOGY**

### **What is a gender-affected sport?**

The nature of contact Rugby League means it is a highly gender-affected sport and one of the main reasons we have separated male and female categories. The term "gender-affected sport" relates to the differences in biological males and biological females, where averages in physical strength, power, stamina, speed and physique create a competitive disadvantage between the sexes. In the context of contact Rugby League, attributes such as strength, power and speed are known to be important factors to performance; there the recognised gap between biological males and biological females means it a highly gender-affected.

### **What do you mean by the words Inclusion, Fairness and Safety?**

We accept that different people have a different understanding of what the terms 'inclusion', 'fairness' and 'safety' mean. For the purposes of this work, we are using 'transgender inclusion' to mean the inclusion of transgender people into the category of their that matches their gender identity. 'Fairness' means competitive equity in relation to the sex category, and as defined within the Equality Act in relation to strength, stamina and physique in gender-affected sport. 'Safety', which is also referenced in the Equality Act, refers to safety from the risk of injury.

## **INCLUSION, FAIRNESS & SAFETY**

### **Is the RFL really committed to wider trans inclusion across sport?**

The RFL is committed to trans inclusion within the game; the introduction of an eligibility criterion within the female game is a position within the Policy that has not been taken easily. However, the current peer-reviewed research available provides sufficient evidence that the physical differences between biological males and biological females is a significant basis. Ultimately, the balance of factors, which include fairness and the safety of all players, is decisive and is a recognised priority. It is important to highlight that the eligibility criteria only refers to contact Rugby League.

The RFL are committed to lobbying and engaging with the IRL and other organisations to undertake further research and explore options to allow wider participation in contact Rugby League. We are also committed to the ongoing review of the Policy as new evidence, research and insight becomes available.

### **What does this mean for transgender women already taking part in Rugby League?**

Transgender women, irrespective of if they have played contact Rugby League previously, will no longer be able to participate in women's contact Rugby League.

### **What can transgender women do to stay involved in Rugby League now that they do not meet the eligibility criteria to participation in women's contact Rugby League?**

The eligibility criteria in the Policy only applies to contact Rugby League. Therefore, there are still a number of opportunities for transgender women to be actively involved in and part of the Rugby League community and we will support them to get involved, whether that is working, volunteering, coaching, officiating, or playing mixed gender variants of Rugby League.

Details on how to get involved are available on the RFL website <https://www.rugby-league.com/get-involved>. There are options for all ages and playing abilities that provide inclusive environments so that everyone can access the social, psychological and physical benefits of Rugby League. For more information on playing <https://www.rugby-league.com/get-involved/play>

For more information on how to get involved in coaching <https://www.rugby-league.com/get-involved/coach>, volunteering <https://www.rugby-league.com/get-involved/volunteer>, or becoming a match official <https://www.rugby-league.com/get-involved/match-officials>.

### **Why do transgender men/boys need to carry out a risk assessment and give consent in order to play men's contact Rugby League?**

For transgender men/boys who wish to play contact Rugby League it is important that the differences between biological males and females are recognised. When participating, the potential increased injury risk for transgender men/boys is with themselves, as opposed to other players. Therefore, it is important that a risk assessment is carried out and informed consent is obtained to ensure the playing environment/level is appropriate and the potential risks are understood.

Coaches should carry out a review of all players' ability on a continual basis and the carrying out of a risk assessment is not limited to transgender players only. That said, a risk assessment is particularly important for transgender men/boys for the reasons mentioned above in terms of the impact of testosterone on a player's speed, strength, mass and power. Coaches assess a player's size, strength, speed, power and skill level to determine playing position, readiness for selection, development areas etc. We would recommend that any player (irrespective of gender) should undergo a more formal risk assessment if they are returning from a long-term injury, returning to the game after a prolonged time out, playing in a different environment etc. This allows the coaches to assess the player's competence to compete safely in men's contact Rugby League and that factors such as physical development, technical ability and Rugby League competency are all taken into consideration. This is similar in nature to the requirement for under-age players to be certified to play against adults, or players playing up or down an age group in age grade Rugby League.

The player or parents providing consent provides reassurance for the club/school that the player/parent is made aware of the potential risks, again this is similar in nature to the requirement for 16-year-old players to be certified to play against adults.

The process in place for transgender men to provide consent and undergo a risk assessment within their club/school is not intended to create barriers to participation, but rather an understanding of the potential risks and a protection for them and those they play with/against.

The RFL request that they are notified by the club/school to confirm they have gained consent and undertaken a risk assessment for any transgender men/boy players.

Rugby League Transgender Application Form <https://www.rugby-league.com/uploads/docs/TransgenderApplicationForm.docx>

### **My friend plays Rugby League and is taller and stronger than everyone else on the team. She has a huge advantage over everyone else, isn't that the same thing as a transgender woman having a strength, mass, or power advantage in women's Rugby League?**

It is true that sport rewards people with natural advantages. A top player in any Rugby League or any sport, will possess a collection of attributes and factors like height, or physiological factors like muscle-fibre type, and cardiorespiratory systems that are important for speed, endurance, power, and strength.

The nature of Rugby League means that advantages in these attributes are often rewarded through performance. However, it is important that any rewards are a) the ones that truly matter to the outcome, and b) not so large and decisive that they either distort any meaningful competition and the outcome, or create a potential safety and welfare risks for any players.

Biological males are typically larger, have more muscle, are stronger, faster, and more powerful. All these factors create physiological differences that are so large that they create insurmountable performance advantages for biological males in almost all sports not just Rugby League, along with associated risk factors for females in direct competition with them. It is for this reason that Rugby League is separated into categories of biological sex, rather than gender.

**Some women are much better at sport than men, and there is a lot of overlap between them. Why should it be a problem for transwomen to play women's sport when many women are stronger, faster and more powerful than a lot of men?**

It is true that the best female players outperform many male players. For a single variable such as upper body strength, however, there is still evidence that typical elite and highly trained female athletes are still weaker than typical untrained males. However, this direct comparison is not necessarily relevant to the assessment of injury risk, safety and performance outcomes.

The valid comparison should be between elite male and elite female players, between male and female club players, or between male and female secondary school players. Within each of these groups, due to the effect of puberty and influence of androgens/testosterone, the biological male player is between 10% and 20% faster, and 20% and 50% stronger and more powerful than a biological female player competing at the same level.

As one would expect, there are some women's players who are heavier than men's players, but this is only true when a particularly heavy woman (the heaviest 10% of women) is being compared to a relatively light man (the lightest 10% of men). At the other extreme of mismatched comparisons, the heaviest 5% of men's players are more than twice as heavy as the lightest 5% of women's players. This highlights that the male physiological attributes far exceed female attributes, which creates both a potential safety risk and performance differences between them.

**Why can't there be a case-by case assessment for transgender women to ensure safety and fairness?**

At present, there is no credible or valid method or combination of tests that can assess physiological variables to ensure appropriate and reliable matching of people for the purposes of fair competition or safety when a circumstance requires that a player fall beneath a set maximum standard. While it is possible to test some simple variables, such as mass and height, this would not alleviate the discrepancy between cisgender women and transgender women, because the strength, power and speed advantages exist even after mass is adjusted.

The same issue is true for the measurement of strength, power, and speed. In the case of transgender women, the objective would be to not exceed a set measurement point/threshold, this makes the validity and reliability of this testing very problematic and potentially undermined by inability to ensure effort when the incentive exists to underperform in the test.

Most significantly, there is no valid or reliable method by which a set measurement point/threshold for each variable can be set. This is a challenge that is encountered by the Paralympic categories, where testing aims to establish the magnitude of a disadvantage (in performance, as a result of various types of disabilities) such that similarly affected athletes compete only against one another. This method is fraught with difficulties but is feasible when only one variable (for instance, degree of visual impairment) requires assessment.

There are several challenges and considerations, any robust physiological testing would require a complex set of safety and performance determinants, requiring specific laboratory and field-testing and there are numerous ethical considerations. It requires a test on a cohort of players (transgender women) which would effectively sub divide that group into those who are 'too strong' and 'too fast', and those who are not. This creates a scenario where some transgender women would be excluded for effectively not being "womanly" enough. This is arguably a more stigmatising and potentially harmful approach.

It could create a perverse incentive for transgender women players to avoid gaining strength, fitness, speed, or power. Any improvements may push a player above these proposed thresholds, and lead to the exclusion, which

means their motivation would be to limit improvement, contrary to the spirit of Rugby League. It would also necessitate regular repeat testing because it is known that variables such as strength, speed and power can change rapidly in response to training and rest.

The inability to currently identify valid and reliable tests, thresholds, and algorithms, would ultimately be assessed within a legal framework that asks to what degree of certainty can safety be guaranteed? The case-by-case approach may actually increase liability concerns rather than alleviate them.

### **Why is there thought to be a potential safety risk if transgender women play women's contact Rugby League?**

The physiological differences between biological males and biological females create a potential increased injury risk. We know that injuries in Rugby League are more likely to occur during tackles and other contact situations (such as challenges for kicks), and we know that these injuries are the direct result of the physical forces being applied to the body of the player. The higher the mass and the more strength, power and speed a player has, the more potential they have to exert a higher force in a contact situation. This combination of increased mass, strength, power, and speed means that the forces created by a biological male in a direct physical contest with a biological female creates a potentially higher risk of injury.

## **SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH**

### **What science is this based on?**

The review has explored and considered the most up to date peer-reviewed and published studies, including that referenced by other contact/collision sports including World Rugby and the SCEG group. It is acknowledged that this is an evolving space and there are limitations within the current research, for example the testosterone reduction analysis has predominantly been carried out on non-athletically trained individuals. Further research and understanding in this area is needed and the RFL is committed to reviewing the Policy regularly to ensure it aligns with the latest research and recommendations.

### **The previous Policy used testosterone low levels (below 5nmols for 12 months) as a measure to allow transgender women to participate in Rugby League, why is this no longer the case?**

There has been a number of advances in new studies which assess physical function more comprehensively and with more control than previous longitudinal research studies. The findings confirm that only small reductions in strength and lean body mass with no loss in bone mass are seen after twelve months of testosterone suppression in transwomen who undergo typical medical interventions. The current research shows that testosterone reduction or suppression does not negate all the physiological advantages of testosterone (acquired during puberty), specifically strength, stamina and physique. For example, strength reductions between 5% and 8% are documented with testosterone reduction, which is only a small proportion of the initial 30% to 80% strength differences that exists between biological males and females.

As a result, the evidence from controlled longitudinal studies shows that lowering testosterone does not achieve parity in the studied physiological attributes that contribute to both safety and performance in Rugby League. The implication is that the biological advantages are largely retained, and so cisgender women players who are participating with and against transgender women are at an increased risk of injury because of the contact nature of Rugby League.

### **Are you confident the research that this is based on is robust?**

The research this is based upon has been peer-reviewed and is publicly available, but it is acknowledged that this is an evolving space, and we will continue to review all available information as it emerges. To this point, the current research conclusively shows that:

- Performance differences arise largely as a result of the physiological differences between biological males and females that are created during puberty and adolescence.
- By adulthood, these performance differences can range in size, between 10% and 15% for running events, to approximately 25% to 30% for strength, 40% for mass, 30% for power and explosive jump performance, and over 100% for complex tasks like punching.

- Evidence from numerous well-controlled longitudinal studies, all of which are peer-reviewed, suggests the lowering of testosterone removes only a small portion of the biological advantages. There is no change in bone mass or density, and only 5% to 10% reductions in lean muscle mass and strength. The reversal of performance advantages is thus only one-fifth of the initial advantage, which leaves a significant remaining advantage, particularly for attributes of strength and mass.

More information on the research and published papers are available at:

[SCEG: INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH LITERATURE REVIEW - Transgender Inclusion in Domestic Sport 2020](#)

[SCEG: PROJECT REPORT - Transgender Inclusion in Domestic Sport 2021](#)

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