

## **Adult Male Competition Structure Group**

### **Why is this work happening?**

- There has been over 30 years of league rugby in the adult male game in England, with arguably relatively few major changes in recent times, and this is set against the context of a greatly changing socio-economic landscape and new standards of player welfare considerations.
- Whilst the game generally continues to buck the downward participation trend seen in some other team sports, there is an accepted view from all available evidence that it is the female and age grade sectors of the Game that are supporting this. In the adult male game whilst the playing pool continues to grow, players are playing less often, and have different wants and needs than 30 years ago, which with relatively little change in the way competitive rugby is delivered, means more players are required to fulfil a 1st XV league season, which is having a corresponding negative effect on Lower XVs.
- This has been evidenced more clearly in recent times through data from Electronic Matchcards which shows on average 43 players to fulfill a 1<sup>st</sup> XV league season and some correlation with those clubs that use more players, having declining lower XV teams or increased walkover rates of Lower XVs.
- Alongside this there is a prevailing trend of less teams in the English Clubs Championship with teams dropping out into merit leagues, but also the merit leagues seeing some decline in teams in some regions.
- All of this is supported by insight from sources such as the National Rugby Survey (NRS), as well as anecdotally through club engagement, which highlights that players value 'flexibility' and 'variety' in their rugby offer as key in allowing them to maintain/increase their frequency of engagement with rugby.
- Whilst it is recognised that different levels of the community game and regions have different challenges and opportunities, the general question as to whether the competitive structure we have is the best one to ensure the future health of the Game had been raising its head in Club and CB forums throughout the last 12 months, and through competitions management issues coming to the surface in various areas of the country.
- With the ongoing work the RFU are undertaking in 'Project Union' to, amongst other things, strengthen and unite rugby union in England under the guiding principles of 'players first', 'open to all' and 'financially strong', and set against the context above, The Adult Male Competition Structure Group was created as a task group of the Community Game Board.

### **What is the purpose/scope?**

- The Group's purpose is to review the adult male competition structure of the English Club Championship from Level 3 downwards and recommend an optimal playing offer and structure that protects the future health of the Game for adult men by meeting the needs of current and future players, balancing quality of experience and player welfare needs with less travel whilst at the same time protecting the (financial and other) sustainability of clubs.
- The Group will consider a number of areas and in particular the Group shall review and make recommendations to the CGB on: the principles and rationale behind how league rugby will be organised, the optimal number of matches including any cup and friendlies, the extent to which promotion and relegation is applied and the principles of playoffs, the optimal structure for management of competitions, the extent to which CB boundaries should be used to define leagues; what, if any, restrictions there should be on lower XV teams participating in leagues and the provision of national cup competitions. Finally the group will debate whether any recommendations should be put in place for the 2020/21 or 2021/22 season noting that CGB had already endorsed implementation for 2020/21.
- The group is Chaired by RFU Board member, and also a Council Member, and contains other Council Members including the Chairs of the two major Competitions Committees, members from other Unions / Sports, and RFU Staff.

### **What is the timeline?**

July-Oct 2019:	Information gathering
Nov / Dec 2019:	Wider consultation with the Game via listening group(s) and RFU Council
Dec 2019:	Final update to CGB
Jan 2020:	CGB decision on recommendations
Feb 2020:	Discussion at Council
March 2020:	Review work and further information gathering
April 2020:	Council decision
June 2020:	Regulation changes put to Council for approval
Summer 2020:	Communication with the Game
September 2020:	New structures in place

### **What is the progress and what next?**

- The Group has met twice, and considered insights and data from electronic matchcards, national rugby survey, case studies from the Game, and knowledge / feedback from those who sit on the Group.
- Outline principles have been agreed; Competitions are delivering for players first (i.e. a great player experience - convenience, accessible, fun), with less maybe being more at certain levels, whilst ensuring appropriate level of competition and financial viability for clubs.
- The next stage of the process is to move to creation of various Competitions 'models' based on player insight. These will be agreed by the Group and then presented to CGB at end of October, along with a methodology for how and where these will be socialized, tested, researched with the Game.
- At its meeting on 24th October, CGB were updated on the Groups purpose, terms of ref., membership and insights, discussions, and direction of travel to date. This Included Group member's views and other feedback given since the last meeting from stakeholder groups such as the NCA and DOCs.
- CGB were asked to endorse the principles of the work done, namely creating a future structure that is delivering for players first and a great player experience (taking into account travel, welfare, changing socio-economic factors and the desired amount of matches players want to play at different levels, set against the impact of current structures). CGB endorsed the principles of the Groups work, and the method / content for socialising with the Game.
- The plan is that this will happen via 8 listening panels covering players and all non-playing roles across regions over the next 4-6 weeks. The Competitions team in Rugby Growth are working through the details on this now and can share more in due course. It is planned that we will provide 3 options for season structure and league structures at these meetings (ranging from an evolution to something that more fully answers the insights and principles discussed), and then a facilitated discussion would be held allowing feedback to be captured and any new models / ideas proposed. The options would not include the status quo but this will no doubt be discussed. There would also be listening panels with RFU staff, to provide a comparison. CGB continued to endorse the timing of implementation in September 2020, though it was noted this was particularly tight and there may be areas that should be prioritised over others in a final recommendation, depending on further feedback from the Game. The feedback from these listening panels will support a final recommendation from the Group to CGB and a CGB decision in January.
- The next meeting of the Group is 14th November and there will be an update for discussion at RFU Council is on 29th November. For further information, questions or feedback please contact:
- [Competitions-Development@RFU.com](mailto:Competitions-Development@RFU.com)