



Under 19 Commission Report

Approved by the RFU Community Game Board:

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1. Introduction

With no clear pathway from age grade rugby to the adult game, RFU data and Sport England's Active People Survey suggests that this greatly reduces the chances of young players being retained in the sport.

The transition from age 14 to 19, into adult rugby is complex and difficult to manage, with challenges both associated with the playing elements of rugby and broader societal factors related to how young people choose to spend their leisure time.

An increasingly physical game for 15 and 16 year olds used to playing in a single age group and moving into a complex landscape at 17 and 18 could impact negatively on playing numbers. Young players are often torn between playing with their peers as Under 17s, stepping up to play within a two year age band as Under 18s, or being drafted into adult rugby.

This happens when their lives are undergoing dramatic change involving greater independence, taking up full or part-time employment, and the pressure of major exams.

Transitioning more players from age grade to adult rugby is essential in growing the game. To understand issues involved and respond to them positively, the RFU established a time limited Commission to explore the landscape and identifying the key areas in which action may be needed.

1.1 Why was the U19 Commission set up?

Currently, a male 17 year old rugby player can play 15-a-side rugby in four different age groups: Under 17, Under 18 (with U18s), Under 19 (with U17s & 18s) and adult rugby (all ages above U16). While this offers choice it also lacks a clear pathway into the adult game and the U19 Commission was set up to identify the extent that this contributes to losing young players.

Over the past two years the RFU carried out Age Grade and Adult Competition Reviews which demonstrated the need to focus on transition to adult rugby, and emphasised the need for a clearer and coordinated programme in the 16-19+ age groups. There are significant challenges in this age group as the way people engage with and participate in sport is changing at a time when there are other external influences on their lives. There is a clear need address the drop-off at 16-19 to ensure the future health of our sport.

While there is a similar trend emerging in the Under 18 three-year age band in the female game, which will need to be addressed before the same issues occur, this Commission was specifically tasked with looking at the men's game.

1.2 Summary of high level recommendations

Having considered a wealth of research, data, opinion, trends and views, the Commission has determined a set of high level recommendations which have been adopted. Some require additional exploration, with further detail on these contained in section four.

- 1.2.1 The half game rule, successfully pioneered in New Zealand and now implemented in Wales, to be introduced for all rugby up to and including U19 from the 2018/19 season to guarantee players in a match day squad at least half a game of rugby.
- 1.2.2 The Commission believes that there is significant merit in delaying the ability to play adult rugby until the date of a player's 18th birthday and recommends that a task group considers this further.
- 1.2.3 Over playing, both in the overall amount of rugby and in intensity, is a concern affecting a growing number of young players. The Commission has noted that is particularly prevalent in U15 and U16 players and recommends that further work be undertaken to define playing and rest times for age grade players, up to and including, U19.

- 1.2.4 The importance of a varied playing offer across the U14-U19 age groups should not be underestimated. Further work is necessary to ensure that all rugby providers are supported in ensuring more choice for players – in formats and in when rugby is scheduled. This should include 15s, 7s, XRugby and touch rugby.
- 1.2.5 Improving the tracking of players from U14 through to adult rugby will help to identify players at risk of over playing and those dropping out so that this can be monitored more effectively. The Commission recommends that Electronic Match Cards be mandatory for all age grade club rugby from season 2019/20 and that further work should explore the expansion of the existing club age grade player registration system into educational establishments.
- 1.2.6 With drop out of players significant in this age group, the Commission recommends that the current work being undertaken by the RFU on player tracking is given the highest priority, and is adopted with urgency, so that players are monitored passing through the latter stages of age grade rugby into the adult game.
- 1.2.7 With brand affiliation increasingly important for young people, the Commission recommends the development of two clear brand campaigns, one looking more closely at what U17/U18/U19 rugby is called and how it is promoted to aid retention, and one looking at how to attract more U14 –U19s into rugby. The latter should be modelled closely on recent successful RFU campaigns, such as Inner Warrior.
- 1.2.8 With young people having increased choice about where they spend their time and spending increasing time on mobile devices, access to Wi-Fi is important. The Commission recommends that greater support be provided to all rugby clubs to improve Wi-Fi access/connectivity, with the target of all clubs being fully Wi-Fi accessible by September, 2019. Consideration should also be given to rolling out social media training for club officials, where required.
- 1.2.9 A young player's interaction with adults in the game is critical in keeping them involved – a positive experience can retain, a negative one put them off for life. The Commission recommends that a task group further considers how to encourage and support more coaches and match officials, including parent-coaches, in better understanding modern day young players' needs and the importance of their role in transitioning players to adult rugby. It further recommends that work is undertaken to provide examples of how clubs can focus on player transition as a measure of success and how they can create and establish a player transition mindset across all club members.
- 1.2.10 To further support the delivery of the RFU's existing male 15-a-side strategy, the Commission recommends further work to consider what measures would incentivise clubs to run teams up to and including U19 and to ultimately position the U18/U19s as their most important team.

2. Background

2.1 The Commission's Role

The U19 Commission's remit was to act as a review and listening group. The Commission gathered evidence from players and practitioners in the game to identify areas which need addressing, and makes recommendations seeking to improve retention rates of the 16-year-old male player through to adult rugby.

The U19 Commission gathered evidence from those in the field, other sports and relevant experts and analysed the broader landscape for today's young people. Over a 12 month period (September 2016 to September 2017) the Commission conducted a series of panel sessions to hear from the game and absorbed a vast amount of additional information. The work has been supported by the RFU's wider insights findings to capture all stakeholders' views. The subsequent report seeks to detail challenges, opportunities, and some high level recommendations. The Commission's overarching remit was to make genuinely transformative recommendations, rather than attempting to problem solve, which would fall to specialist task groups the broad recommendations having been adopted.

2.2 Terms of Reference

Concerning male rugby players aged U15 to U19

1. To receive and consider an overview of the current playing landscape—in the context of the recently revised landscape for U14 and below
2. To consider insights from other rugby nations and other sports on their programmes
3. To listen to the views of different sectors of the game and those of relevant external organisations
4. To hear the views of current and lapsed players
5. To receive and consider reports on player safety and injury
6. To consider the current provision (quantity and quality) of match officiating and coaching
7. To consider the implications of the findings on senior rugby
8. To produce a report detailing the challenges and opportunities identified
9. To produce a shortlist of proposed high level actions for the Community Game Board to consider and for the working groups to take forward

2.3 Commission Membership

Ted Atkinson (Chair)	<i>RFU Council Member</i>
Michelle Andrews	<i>Marketing Director, Old Mutual Wealth</i>
David Cook	<i>Director of Rugby, Heathfield & Waldron RFC</i>
Danny Grewcock	<i>Director of Sport, Oundle School</i>
Steve Grainger	<i>RFU Rugby Development Director</i>
Gareth Griffiths	<i>Head of Sponsorship, O2</i>
John Lawn	<i>RFU Head of Game Development</i>
Andy Leach	<i>Lymm Rugby Club</i>
Ben Lowe	<i>RFU Head of Rugby Growth</i>
Rob Linthwaite	<i>Notts, Links and Derby CB Rep, Former National Youth Council member</i>
Kate Marks	<i>National Youth Council Vice-Chair</i>
Alison Oliver	<i>CEO, Youth Sport Trust</i>
Nigel Orton	<i>England Rugby Football Schools Union</i>
Stephen Pearson	<i>RFU Council and Board Member</i>
Dennis Richards	<i>Head teacher</i>
Dean Ryan	<i>RFU Head of International Performance</i>
Mark Saltmarsh	<i>RFU Head of Education Development</i>
Henry Snow	<i>National Youth Council</i>
Vince Thorne	<i>RFU Corporate Strategy Manager</i>
Gillian Winter	<i>Further Education Principal</i>

2.4 Areas considered

The Commission was asked to take a no holds barred approach when assessing the U14-U19 rugby playing landscape. Crucially, they needed to fully understand the landscape, and challenges faced in engaging and retaining players. The sorts of questions posed included:

- At what age should players be playing adult rugby?
- Which playing/training schedules work for players in clubs, school and colleges?
- What are the perceptions of player safety and what is stopping players taking up rugby?
- Is adult club rugby the only option for players aged 18+ not in full time education?
- How important is the quality of coaching and refereeing?
- What do players want from rugby?
- Why do players drop out?
- How important and what should the parents' role be?

3. How did it work?

3.1 Desk Research

The Commission studied a number of reports and surveys to fully understand the current landscape and behaviour influencers

3.1.1 Current Landscape – National Rugby Survey

The National Rugby survey is designed to help determine the attitudes and motivations of the rugby community in order to shape the future of the game. The annual survey gives everyone involved in the sport the opportunity to express their views and takes around 15 minutes to complete.

3.1.1.1 Who is the current player?

18 years old and below. 90% male, 10% female. Rugby teammates come before all else, and friendship groups are defined by the game. More likely to be competitive / performance motivated than older players but still a mix which includes less experienced or recreational / enjoyment players. Rugby more likely to come first and life has to fit in but still liable to be external pressure on participation

3.1.1.2 What is going on in their lives beyond rugby?

- Busy lives: free time under pressure, 80%+ live in urban areas, rise of pay and play lifestyle, increase cost of living / debt
- Increasingly health aware: obesity / sugar / fat headlines, fitness awareness magnified
- Pick and mix attitude: looking for wide range of experiences, lots of churn and more lifestyle sport options
- Incredibly digitally savvy: tech is ingrained in their lives, constantly shifting landscape
- Role Models & importance of friends: celebrity driven culture, icons a major influencer, friendships developed via interests, more in education
- Shifting demographic: growing ethnic mix

3.1.1.3 What other sports is rugby competing with for these players?

More than 50% also play football and more than 30% also play cricket. 25% run. 21% swim. Majority will also do some kind of gym or x fitness work (eg weights).

3.1.1.4 Where are they currently playing?

850 clubs have active mini and junior sections. 1,600 state secondary schools, 470 independent schools, 3,000 state primary schools and 270 colleges are active in rugby.

3.1.1.5 How many play, how often and is it growing?

120k players aged 14-19, numbers flat in the short-term, slight decline in long-term. Majority training or playing regularly (at least fortnightly). Majority claim to play 11-30 matches a season, increasing as they get older.

3.1.1.6 Why do they play?

Social and being part of a team, enjoyment / fun, competition / playing opportunity, fitness / physical, skill development

The following information is taken from the National Rugby & Age Grade Surveys, which received over 28,000 responses from males and females, and provides a geographical spread across the country.

3.1.2 Lapsed players

The key reasons identified for dropping out of school and youth rugby for 14-18 year olds were injury and fear of injury, playing another sport, time pressures, proximity to club and too much pressure. For 18-21 year olds the reasons were different, summarised as leaving school, a lack of coaching, the post-match culture, limited opportunities to play and not playing with friends.

3.1.3 Current Players

For current players from the ages of 17-24 the reasons for playing less in the coming season (in order of response rate) were friends not playing or not playing with friends, not enjoying the sport, not enough time to play, playing other sports or other interests and the fear of injury (however this was comparatively lower in frequency than other responses).

3.1.4 Player Safety

The occurrence of severe injuries keeping a player out of the game for 12 weeks or more are considerably more rare than more minor 1-4 week injuries.

3.1.4.1 Match Injury Rates by Severity

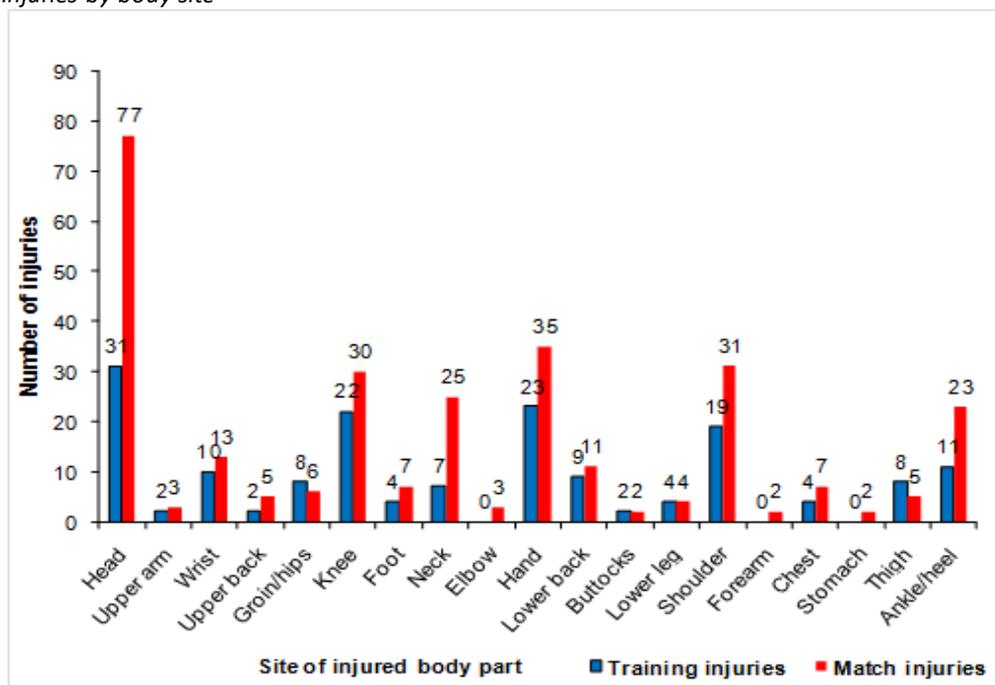
- U15 – U18 Schools Rugby Injury Surveillance Study 2016
- Matches - 21,865 exposure-hours (1,315 team-matches)
- Training - 63,636 training exposure-hours with injury incidence of 1.2/ 1000 exposure-hours)

	One over 1 week injury per x team games*	One over 4 week injury per x team games*	One over 12 week injury every X team games*
U15	4	11	58
U16	3	6	79
U18	3	8	25
Combined	3	8	37

*in the context of a mean of ~12 school games per season (maximum of 21)

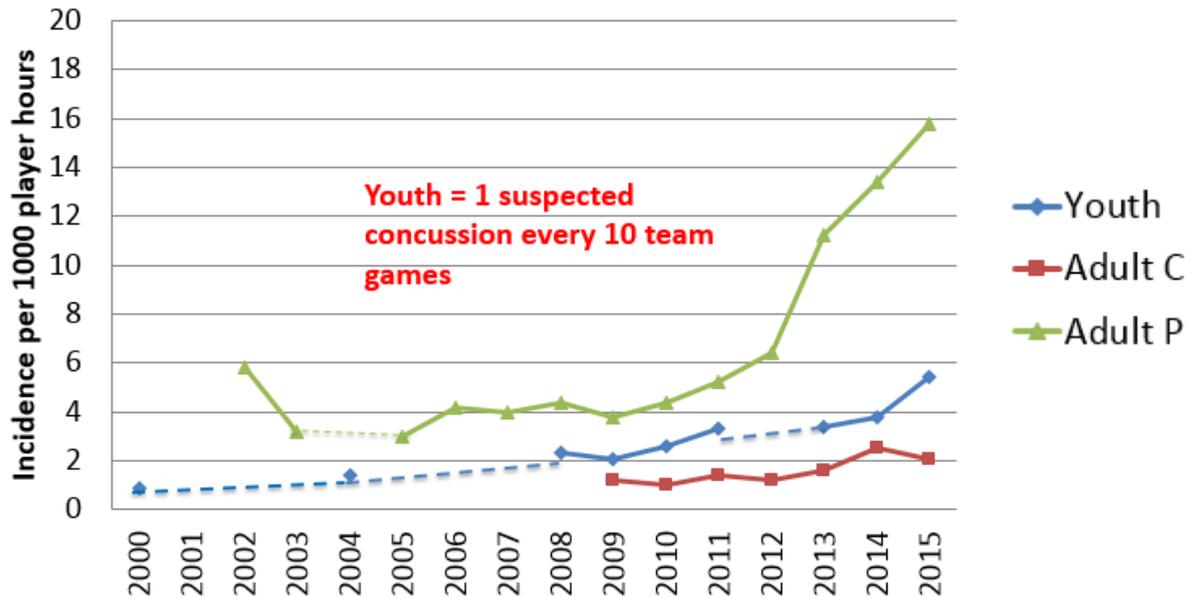
Injury surveillance of schoolboy players demonstrates that there are still opportunities to reduce the occurrence of injury, especially in training which should be a more controlled environment.

3.1.4.2 Injuries by body site



Within the youth game (male schoolboy) on average there is one suspected concussion every ten games.

3.1.4.3 Concussion Incidence



Analysis of the youth game in school rugby highlights that there are – on average - more tackles in the youth schoolboy game compared to the recreational game (L7-9) amateur game L5-6 and semi pro game (L3-4).

Events	U15	U18	Recreation	Amateur	Semi-pro
Pass	172	209	154	169	205
Kick (All)	45	46	48	50	48
Touch	14	12	20	22	20
Infield	31	34	29	28	29
Tackles	169	170	118	127	150
Rucks	131	133	95	103	123
Mauls	19	12	21	25	20
Lineout (All)	20	22	23	25	23
Scrum (All)	19	19	29	30	30
Reset (%)	19	26	21	20	23
Collapse (%)	1	2	5	6	6

3.1.5 Other Key Headlines

Other relevant headlines from the National Rugby Survey include:

- Focusing on 14-21 year olds, rather than those over 25, could improve retention by 40% as younger players play more frequently and if engaged stay in the game for longer
- Males mostly grew up playing the game – experience at school, family, friends important in early years
- Rugby satisfaction is generally high and there is strong net promotion (ie recommend playing to a friend / family member)

3.1.6 Age Group Team Numbers by Constituent Body (2016/17 Season)

The table below demonstrates that challenges of transitioning and retaining players from U14 – U18 is not localised. Many reasons for drop-off in teams are discussed in more detail in the body of the report, however these figures show that it is possible to grow the game by retaining and transitioning existing players. Cross border competitions, delaying the transition into adult rugby, flexible playing offers, player-centred coaching, access to quality match officials, compliance with the age grade calendar and introduction of the half game rule may all contribute to improving number of teams and players.

Area	CB	Voting Clubs	U18 Teams	U17 Teams	U16 Teams	U15 Teams	U14 Teams
1	<i>Cornwall</i>	29	10	1	12	13	16
	<i>Devon</i>	40	20	0	24	25	25
	<i>Dorset & Wilts</i>	36	15	1	19	18	20
	<i>Somerset</i>	48	19	4	29	23	23
	<i>Gloucestershire</i>	68	14	5	28	27	38
2	<i>Berkshire</i>	13	8	0	9	10	10
	<i>Buckinghamshire</i>	16	10	2	10	11	12
	<i>Middlesex</i>	62	9	10	14	20	22
	<i>Hampshire</i>	35	18	0	17	18	21
	<i>Hertfordshire</i>	26	13	5	19	16	20
	<i>Oxfordshire</i>	18	9	1	12	10	8
3	<i>Surrey</i>	70	27	25	26	27	31
	<i>Sussex</i>	32	14	14	14	15	17
	<i>Kent</i>	57	20	20	27	30	32
	<i>Essex</i>	41	14	15	20	23	25
4	<i>Warwickshire</i>	43	16	4	9	18	16
	<i>Eastern Counties</i>	47	18	0	22	26	22
	<i>East Midlands</i>	40	17	9	22	19	20
	<i>Notts, Lincs & Derby</i>	53	18	14	26	29	32
	<i>Leicestershire</i>	29	11	5	13	13	13
5	<i>Cheshire</i>	43	16	11	19	23	26
	<i>Lancashire</i>	58	14	18	26	29	35
	<i>North Midlands</i>	60	19	18	32	27	33
	<i>Staffordshire</i>	29	7	13	9	13	16
6	<i>Northumberland</i>	21	10	6	11	11	14
	<i>Durham</i>	30	7	11	14	14	16
	<i>Cumbria</i>	21	4	3	9	7	10
	<i>Yorkshire</i>	94	17	27	32	40	42
Totals		1159	394	242	524	555	615

3.2 Interviews, Surveys and Presentations

The Commission gathered evidence from a wide range of stakeholders involved in the game to assess the current landscape and desirable changes to develop the game.

3.2.1 Rugby Community

The Commission gathered evidence from the rugby community through interviews and surveys from current and lapsed players, coaches, club officials, the education sector and club and Constituent Body volunteers.

Interview sessions (either by phone or in person) were conducted with:

- Beverley RFC
- Darlington RFC
- London Welsh RFC
- North Bristol RFC
- Otley RFC
- Preston Grasshoppers RFC
- Roundhegians RFC
- Sandal RFC
- Sheffield RFC
- Streatham Croydon RFC

3.2.2 External Agencies/Partners

The Commission gathered evidence from external agencies and partners from within and outside the game, including other NGBs, youth/education bodies, CBs, rugby unions, youth associations, charities and agencies working within sport and with this age group. Interviews were conducted with, or evidence was gathered from:

3.2.2.1 Youth/Education bodies

- The Cadet Forces
- The Scouts Association
- The YMCA
- British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS)
- Youth Sport Trust
- Euan Ferguson (Headteacher, Isleworth and Syon School)

3.2.2.2 Rugby Unions

- Australia Rugby Union
- New Zealand Rugby Union
- Scottish Rugby Union

3.2.2.3 Agencies and Partners

- O2 Head of Sponsorship
- SEED (work on O2 Touch)

3.2.2.4 Charities

- StreetGames

3.2.2.5 Other National Governing Bodies

- The England and Wales Cricket Board
- England Athletics
- RFU Community Medical Director and Player Welfare Manager

4. What did we discover?

4.1 Current Landscape

Regular competitive rugby helps to keep some young players engaged, while for others the social side of the game involving friends is more important. It's essential to support both. When state school players get little access to rugby, clubs are historically good at stepping in to fill this gap and programmes like CBRE All Schools are making rugby much more accessible.

There was general agreement that high quality coaching and officiating and the right training and playing offer is extremely important to keep players engaged. The current rugby calendar for this age group varies significantly in different parts of the country. Most people start playing rugby in school, highlighting the importance of creating the right offer in the school setting. The National Rugby Survey showed that the older the player, the more likely they are to have started playing rugby in school (younger players are more likely to be influenced by other areas of their lives, like TV, social media etc).

4.1.1 14-16 at school

There is increasing pressure on schools to perform academically, with GCSE results a key barometer and PE not a core subject. Schools will consequently prioritise academic subjects ahead of PE, sport and rugby and tighter school budgets are also a contributory factor. However, the CBRE All Schools programme has demonstrated that rugby's values are also a key attraction for schools. This sits under the more widespread citizenship and character agenda. State secondary school rugby has grown with the 600 All Schools now involved. In the more traditional rugby-playing schools there is increasing pressure from parents and governors on head teachers to ensure the game is safe and the choice to play contact or non-contact and flexible formats (such as XRugby) is made more available. Less established rugby playing schools face significant challenges in continuing to play rugby, with costs of coaching, travel and staff time. Students themselves are also more discerning and choice is a clear driver for them gravitating towards activities they enjoy both inside and outside the curriculum.

4.1.2 14-16 in club

Club rugby continues to be attractive to new and existing players in the earlier teenage years. Recent club forums highlight the strength of the U13 pool and the potential to build this age group, as well as the expansion of the game into new schools. The rollout of Old Mutual Wealth Kids First and rules of play have taken this pool to a new level. The changes to the Age Grade game and calendar are landing particularly well in some areas with good solution work in others. However, numbers and quality level of volunteer coaches present a challenge, with organisers also highlighting clubs and schools vying for the same players. The club tends to become the junior partner without a good collaborative approach; the rugby network (CBs, CSUs) is taking an increasingly important role in helping to address this.

4.1.3 16-19 at school

All young people must now be in education and training until the age of 18. Retention of players continues to be a challenge at these ages in schools/colleges, although, there is some anecdotal evidence that the first cohort of players who started the new rules of play in early years and now in the U16 age band are more likely to continue playing. This is the case in clubs as well. Schools/colleges generally play two or three age bands together rather than single age band rugby from U16 onwards. A number of established rugby playing schools are seeking to expand their rugby offer and exploring more player-centred approaches to their non-performance level players. Variable formats such as O2 Touch are an attraction. The player safety agenda is also front and centre at these ages and drawing a response from schools/colleges focussed on player welfare. Challenges still exist in the relationship between clubs, schools, colleges, representative rugby and Academies. Although the Age Grade changes are making the calendar less congested, players are still being overplayed or underplayed in many areas. The college sector is under great financial pressures and sport is increasingly coming under scrutiny in terms of return on investment. Perceptions of university rugby and reported incidents involving poor behaviour are a barrier to onward participation for some players and parents.

4.1.4 16-19 in club

The opportunities and challenges for club and school players are similar. The choices available to young people continue to be a challenge as rugby vies with many other opportunities for their leisure time. Flexibility, friends and fun are high on the club players' agenda alongside, for a good number, the attraction of competitive contact rugby's physicality. Clubs often combine the U17 with U18 and sometimes U19 ages, creating larger squads and as greater competition for places, which fails to motivate all players. Currently, within the regulations, 17 year olds can play adult rugby and many clubs bring them out of their age grade programme into adult teams. There is some evidence that this is not always a whole club or player-focused decision. The fragmenting of a club peer group at U17 onwards is believed to be a barrier to players transitioning into adult rugby at a later date. However, the chance to sample the game that they can play when they leave the age grade system is something players can react well to if provided in the right way by the right people. Many clubs are finding the appropriate balance and are basing this on the player and their future retention. Most coaches and other volunteers at these key ages are not specialists, but are still well-meaning parents who have brought a team through the years from junior rugby. Clubs should consider their playing schedules carefully, allowing match/training breaks around mock exam times and not having games clash with school/college travel (eg field trips, ski tours). Local liaison between schools/colleges and clubs is needed.

4.2 Transition

It's extremely important that rugby clubs have transition plans and programmes and are supported, when running age grade rugby programmes, to have a plan in place for how they transition players to adult rugby. Clubs, schools, colleges and universities need the right mix of competitive offers alongside fun/social offers. The Commission noted disparate views on age bands in the U17-U19 space as well as the age at which adult rugby should start and suggests that further work is necessary on this issue.

Transition efforts should involve more than taking players through the age groups and into adult rugby. They should include transitioning players into other volunteer roles (coaching, refereeing, club administration). Attempts to reduce the disparity between adult and junior rugby were noted, together with the fact that the significant step up is putting some players off and contributing to drop out. This is also true in the step up from playing non-contact forms of the game (like O2 Touch) into contact rugby.

The National Rugby Survey showed that there are some specific reasons people tend to leave the sport, which are the same for men and women. These include leaving school, lack of coaching, post-match culture and no longer playing alongside friends. The survey also highlighted that competition for players' time from other sports, playing too much rugby, fear of injury or burnout are all reasons players in this age group leave the sport. In clubs, 79% of players rated their enjoyment 9/10 versus 56% in school rugby.

4.3 Barriers

There is significant drop out where players don't achieve what they aspire to and fail to transition to social/other forms of the game. There is significant demand for young people's time. Life events and other pressures like the need to improve CVs, the educational journey, weekend working, mental and physical demands of the game can stop people playing. There is a need to look at how rugby can more easily fit in with demanding lifestyles.

The way in which adults work with young people is an important area for consideration, together with the need to ensure that young people's motivations and measures of success are not overruled by coaches and clubs (ie winning and propping up adult teams). In addition to the demand on time, young people also face conflicting pressures in a rugby context. Whether these come from their school, club, county or even Academy, there is a need to consider how to streamline these areas to reduce pressure.

Perception also has a role in barriers to participation, both in terms of what players (and parents) perceive rugby offers and also in what the modern player is looking for in terms of facilities. The Commission noted the need to explore ways to make returning to rugby easier. Other sports are more easy to returned to as they are less specialised, the contact nature of rugby making it potentially unappealing after a period not participating.

4.4 Player Welfare

Player safety and welfare has been highlighted on a number of occasions by players, parents, coaches and volunteers spoken to. There have been varying views on the impact player safety and welfare concerns have on this age group, with many believing that it's more of an issue for parents than for players. The increasingly important role played by parents in encouraging/discouraging players was noted and should not be ignored.

The Commission is concerned that young community players may mimic the professional game – both in terms of size and style of play. There needs to be consideration as to how players are prepared to manage contact and also help in supporting coaches to understand more about training and playing load. Lots of injury occurs in training sessions and the physical and mental demands of too much contact training can put players off and lead to chronic injury patterns that persist throughout their rugby careers.

Ensuring facilities are of the standard young people expect is important and can have a major impact on a player's safety and welfare. Poor facilities, for example badly maintained pitches and poor floodlighting, can lead to injury. This is a common problem as younger teams don't always have access to the best facilities and clubs need to be aware of the message that this is sending to young players and their parents.

4.5 Coaching and officiating

The Commission's discussions kept returning to the important role played by coaches and match officials, noting that coaching needs to focus more on the continuous development of skills and less on winning at all costs. Match officials need to feel empowered to be an on-pitch coach, helping players' development rather than seeing winning as a measure of success, with any result reflecting individual and collective performance. If winning is the paramount measure of success, the better players will play more and others will walk away from a sport that doesn't allow them to play on the same field as their friends (one of their primary motivators for taking up the game). This is not to undermine the importance of competition but it does mean that mastery of new skills, developing social bonds and playing time are really important to young people.

Rugby is heavily reliant on parent coaches, especially in the age grade game. As players approach the key transition phases of U14 through to adult rugby, the Commission notes that clubs must take seriously the decision on who is responsible for guiding these players. Many young people see their parents' involvement in many of their interests as a negative as they get older and rugby is not immune from this trend. There is a need to look at programmes which keep parents involved in the game, but helps them to understand that players or teams they have coached for seven or eight years may appreciate a different approach. Parent education is important, especially helping them to understand the game, its values, injury risk and how best to support the sporting child.

There are many conflicting demands on match officials – from parents, coaches and players. Their role should be to help players develop and coaches and parents should be reminded of this. Too many match officials are reluctant to officiate games involving 14-19 year olds because of poor touchline behaviour from coaches and parents. To encourage higher standards of officiating, a shared acceptance of responsibility must be adopted to deal with match official abuse. It is important to educate parents in understanding measures of success, standards of behaviour, how the game is played, how the laws are applied and what the injury risks are.

4.6 Communication

The way in which U14-19 year old players are communicated with, and how they communicate with their peers, is extremely important. Social media is king and there is a need to explore ways to communicate with players in the right way, through the right mediums. The idea of an RFU platform focussed around fun and short bursts of content has received positive feedback and further testing with players in this age group is recommended.

We need to consider how to constantly refresh communication with these age groups as it is constantly changing and young players respond much better to videos and pictures, than they do to text. The Commission noted the need to adjust communications strategies in line with this. Having high speed access to Wi-Fi is also an important influencer on where young people choose to spend their social time.

4.7 Environment

There should be a focus on the environment we create in our efforts to bring community and elite rugby closer together as part of the same community. People feel most engaged when enjoying what they are doing and the Commission noted that the focus of the game should be on helping people at all levels enjoy the sport as much as possible.

Young people are interested in what they can get out of participating and efforts to promote this are supported, especially efforts to create a fun filled, friendly environment which provides freedom for young people.

4.8 Young People Today

The Commission heard evidence from various sources on what has become the norm for young people in the 14-19 age group. The internet and social media has existed for the entirety of these young people's lives. They didn't know the world before 9/11 and the traditional pathway of school to university to job is no longer enough for them. They have money worries, and anxieties about getting a job and affording a house. In their free time they spend nearly 3.5 hours a day mobile browsing. Fake news is rife and they struggle to differentiate it from real news.

This generation are very politically aware (issues like terrorism, climate change and nuclear war dominate) and generally have a pretty bleak outlook on life. They are overwhelmed by the importance and enormity of these issues. Social Media is everything. They are very impatient, demanding instant access to everything and they are all perfectionists. They really care about how they look.

Some key statistics on this age group include:

- 24% are constantly online.
- 53% own an iPhone and 96% have a smartphone.
- They spend 48mins or longer online every day, 75% multi-device users and 24% use a game console but their mobile is their most important device

4.8.1 What do they value?

They want to look good online, how they look and how good their life looks online is extremely important, even if it's not the reality. They want to appear to have an amazing life. They post on social media as proof it happened and they LOVE music.

4.8.2 How do they consume sport and media?

Gen-Zs watch sport on TV and do it live in groups. They believe their health is grounded in physical and emotional wellness so it's not a challenge to convince them to exercise, it's what they do to exercise that is the challenge. 75% of them buy online, 60% buy on mobile.

4.8.3 Social Media influences

This generation follow vloggers 70% of these are entertainment networkers. YouTube, Facebook, Messenger, Instagram and Snapchat are still dominant – and 44% use Instagram and 55% use Snapchat daily. The favourite channel is Facebook Messenger, high volume and easy to use. Email is still used by this generation.

4.9 Changes to the state school education landscape

The education sector is guaranteed change and the greatest challenges faced are budgets and staff recruitment, with an accompanying potential impact on extracurricular activity.

Accountability and the level of pressure and scrutiny on head teachers is huge, with new specifications to deal with in the 14-16 age groups. Courses are becoming linear and the curriculum slimmed down to eight subjects. With a focus on other subjects, the importance of PE delivery is taking a back seat. In Key Stage 6 (6th Form) there are, however, opportunities. With the shift back to three A-levels opening up time during the week for students to do other things sport could take advantage. X7s could be a game for schools to offer with relative

ease. The need to ensure students have a more rounded experience in school is being recognised, but there are definitely barriers in schools without a traditional rugby offer.

Sport offers in schools are declining rapidly and an intervention is needed to stop this trend. Physical Education is an easy area to discard which will negatively impact rugby. This generation are significantly different to their predecessors. The time when young people were guided by education is gone, with other aspects of life much more accessible at an earlier age. Rugby, therefore, needs to appeal to a wider audience than ever before as young people are influenced heavily by a wider group of peers – not just by parents or teachers. People in this age group will only engage with an authentic message, so messaging is critical. Young people are, now more than ever, looking for something that they think will benefit wider society. They feel they have less control of their lives and want to take this control back – so demonstrating rugby's ability to help them do this is important. They also want ways to differentiate themselves and don't feel that PE and sport aligns to this.

4.10 International Landscape

The Commission gathered evidence from the Scottish, Australian and New Zealand Rugby Unions. The challenges they face are similar to those in England, with drop off at this age group particularly prevalent in Australia. Rugby union is the fourth largest team sport in Australia, in a very congested market dominated by National Rugby League, Aussie Rules and Soccer. NRL have recently invested \$2m to drive participation and seen a 2% decline in playing numbers, highlighting the scale of the challenge and the need to ensure investment is made in the right areas. The ARU are now taking a ten year view and concentrating on offering different forms of the game (eg touch and tag), shifting their focus from the 15-a-side game in schools to cross-pitch 7s. They are already reporting excellent rates of uptake and strong transition into the 15-a-side game.

New Zealand is split into 26 provincial Unions delivering children's playing programmes. Most of the rugby offers available for players in the 14-19 age group take place in schools, with little club rugby available to this age group. A huge challenge for the NZRU has been children moving to play soccer rather than rugby.

The New Zealand Education Act allows children under 19 to attend school, which means schools sometimes encourage their best rugby players to stay on for an extra year to help their rugby development. Some provinces use age and weight grading where there is a large Polynesian population, but this only works in provinces where there is a big enough playing pool. New Zealand have similar challenges with coaching, where they see players who are not picked for the first XV vote with their feet and lost from the sport.

The NZRU are in the process of determining their strategy for player retention in this age group, with some short-term fixes already implemented (such as funding administrators to track players through age groups and into the adult game). New Zealand have also recently trialled a half game rule, where all players are guaranteed to play at least half the game. There is also a trend emerging around the quality of coaching, as by the time they reach 14/15 years old players can have more knowledge about the modern game than their coaches.

5. Recommendations

Having considered all of the available evidence and data and listened to the views and opinions of diverse individuals and stakeholders within and outside the game, the Commission is making a set of 10 recommendations, which can broadly be categorised across four areas.

5.1 *Playing of the game*

The Commission's key observation is that there needs to be a much greater focus on providing an offer which meets young people's needs and recognises that they want some ownership over what they participate in. The workforce should be encouraged to take notice of the games young people create themselves, and try to emulate these environments in rugby playing structures. Young people want to play the game and should be assured of a decent amount of game time, while not being over-played, which can cause early attrition and drop out. A broad and balanced offer should include sevens and touch as well as 15-a-side, and midweek offers should be considered so that young people can fit rugby in around other commitments. The move from age grade to adult rugby is a challenging one, some players ready for it and transitioning easily but, many others wanting to continue playing with their peers for longer. Our key recommendations are:

- 5.1.1 The half game rule, successfully pioneered in New Zealand and now implemented in Wales, be introduced for all rugby up to and including U19 from the 2018/19 season. This guarantees players present in a match day squad at least half a game of rugby.
- 5.1.2 The Commission believes that there is significant merit in increasing the age at which players can play adult rugby until the date of their 18th birthday and recommends the establishment of a task group to consider this.
- 5.1.3 Over playing, both in overall amount of rugby and intensity, is a concern affecting a growing number of young players. The Commission has noted that this is particularly prevalent in U15 and U16 players and recommends that further work be undertaken to define playing and rest times for age grade players, up to and including, U19s.
- 5.1.4 The importance of a varied playing offer across the U14-U19 age groups must not be underestimated. Further work should be undertaken to ensure that all rugby providers are supported to ensure more choice for players – in both formats and scheduling. This should include 15-a-side, sevens, XRugby and touch rugby, with timing to include Friday evening floodlit playing, as well as Sundays. Match travel commitments should also be a consideration.

5.2 *Tracking of players*

Knowing the amount, type and frequency of rugby being played by this age group and being able to track trends in play is critical in ensuring an appropriate offer and in keeping players in the game. The RFU currently has compulsory player registration for all club players under the age of 18. However, only those seeking to play first team rugby over the age of 18 are registered and there is no tracking of the frequency of participation. Our key recommendations are:

- 5.2.1 Improving the tracking of players from U14 age group through to adult rugby will ensure that trends can be better tracked and players at risk of over playing and dropping out can be monitored more effectively. The Commission recommends that use of Electronic Match Cards for all age grade club rugby be mandatory from season 2019/20 and that further work be done to explore expanding into educational establishments the existing club player registration system for age grade players. Consideration should be given to an RFU (and/or club) interactive platform allowing participants themselves to share their match day experiences.
- 5.2.2 With drop out of players significant in this age group, the Commission recommends that the current work being undertaken by the RFU on player tracking is given the highest priority, and is adopted with

urgency, so that players are monitored as they pass through the latter stages of age grade rugby into the adult game.

5.3 The game connecting with young people

Throughout our work we have gained a much greater understanding of the current 14-19 population and their broader expectations of society and their leisure time. If we are serious about retaining them in the club environment we need to ensure that they are happy to spend their time there – ability to use their mobile devices via Wi-Fi is essential. We have also become very conscious of brand and the need to think differently about how present Colts or U18 rugby – both pretty insular brands in the modern day. Our key recommendations are:

- 5.3.1 With brand connection more and more important for young people, the Commission recommends the development of two clear brand campaigns, one to look more closely at what U17/U18/U19 rugby is called, how it is promoted and how this is used to aid retention, and one to look at attracting more U14 –U19s into rugby. The latter should be modelled closely on recent successful campaigns run by the RFU such as Inner Warrior.
- 5.3.2 With increased choice about where they spend their time and young people dependent on mobile devices, access to Wi-Fi is an important part of their lives. The Commission recommends that greater support be provided to all rugby clubs to improve Wi-Fi access/connectivity with the target of all clubs being fully Wi-Fi accessible by September, 2019. Consideration should also be given to the need for social media training for club officials.

5.4 Player engagement with adults

Many mentions have been made in our work about the importance of a player's interaction with coaches, teachers, match officials and volunteers within the club environment. It has become very clear that these individuals have a significant impact and effect and their behaviours and attitudes can influence the chances of young people being retained in the game. Clubs and schools, colleges and universities need to value and celebrate their successful player transition from U16 to adult rugby, alongside their league/cup ranking. This could include managing transition into coaches' professional development qualifications. Quality of experience is also becoming very important for this age group and coaches and match officials have a significant impact.. Real benefits can be accrued in clubs through having a dedicated volunteer role dedicated to player transition. Our key recommendation is:

- 5.4.1 The interaction a young player has with the adults involved is critical in retaining them – a positive experience can retain, a negative one turn them off for life. The Commission recommends that a task group is established to further consider what more can be done to encourage and support more coaches and match officials, including parent-coaches, to play an active role with this age group. This would include supporting them in better understanding modern day young players' needs and recognising the importance of their role in transitioning players to adult rugby. It further recommends that work is undertaken to provide examples of how clubs can focus on player transition as a measure of success and how they can create and establish a player transition mindset across all club members.

5.5 Club focus on teenage teams

The Commission noted the extensive work undertaken in recent years to grow clubs' mini and junior sections across the country. This offers a significant base of players and, together with recent efforts through the CBRE All Schools programme to grow the game in state secondary schools, should mean that there are many more teenage players entering clubs. It is crucial now that clubs are ready to offer meaningful and quality rugby experiences for this age group and hence our final recommendation is that:

- 5.5.1 To further support the delivery of the RFU's existing male 15-a-side strategy further work is undertaken to consider what measures may be taken to incentivise clubs to run teams up to and including U19 and to ultimately position the U18/U19 team as the most important team in a club

Appendix I – Commission Biographies

Ted Atkinson (Chair)	<i>RFU Council Member representing Yorkshire, former Manager of England U18s and member of Player Development Sub-Committee.</i>
Michelle Andrews	<i>MD of Marketing for Old Mutual Wealth involved in rugby through sponsorship encompassing the men's and women's Autumn series, plus the Kids First initiative for U7-13.</i>
David Cook	<i>Coach of age grade rugby from U9s to U18s at club, county and Harlequins Academy (Sussex school of rugby) levels. Short-listed for the National Rugby Awards Coach of the Year in 2015 and now coaches Heathfield RFC senior teams.</i>
Danny Grewcock	<i>Professional rugby union player from 1995 to 2011. Five years at Bath as Academy Director, now Director of Sport at Oundle School in Northamptonshire.</i>
Steve Grainger	<i>RFU Rugby Development Director, former CEO of the Youth Sport Trust. Responsibility for all RFU rugby development activities, ensuring that the nation's clubs, colleges, universities and schools have the capacity and capabilities to sustain and grow the game.</i>
Gareth Griffiths	<i>Head of Sponsorship for O2. Responsibility for The O2 arena, 19 O2 Academy venues nationwide and O2's long-standing England Rugby sponsorship, as well as sport in O2's customer loyalty programme Priority, Up at The O2 and the market-leading Priority Tickets partnership with Live Nation and AEG.</i>
John Lawn	<i>RFU Head of Game Development responsible for the development and delivery of education and training courses for coaches, match officials and medics at all levels of the community game.</i>
Andy Leach	<i>Chairman of Cheshire club Lymm RFC's Mini, Junior & Colts Section, a member of the Cheshire CB Mini & Junior Committee, a member of the Northwest Colts League Committee and part of the Activation & Legacy Group for the recent World Rugby U20 Championship.</i>
Ben Lowe	<i>RFU Head of Rugby Growth responsible for the work to grow participation. Specifically to integrate touch rugby, sevens and the women's and girls' game more effectively into its overall strategic plan, manage the RFU's participation data to develop co-ordinated insights into trends within the game and in wider society and associated interventions to support growth, retention and player development.</i>
Rob Linthwaite	<i>Former player and now Honorary Secretary and Director of West Bridgford RFC, President of Nottinghamshire RFU, CB Volunteer Coordinator for NLD and Active Level 7 referee. Chair and founding member of the National Youth Council.</i>
Kate Marks	<i>Player and Vice-Chair of the RFU's National Youth Council and also a Young Rugby Ambassador.</i>
Alison Oliver	<i>Chief Executive Officer of the Youth Sport Trust, an independent charity devoted to building a brighter future for young people through PE and school sport. Ali joined the Youth Sport Trust in 2004 and has been employed in various roles within the organisation before her appointment as CEO in 2015.</i>
Nigel Orton	<i>Executive Chairman of England Rugby Schools (ERFSU) and the RFU's National Youth Disciplinary Secretary. Serves on both Schools & Youth Governance and the Education Development Sub-Committees and has previously been on Playing Development. Nigel is a Vice President of Middlesex and a Referee Assessor for the Hertfordshire Society. Nigel coached school and county U18s throughout his teaching career.</i>

Stephen Pearson	<i>Fund Management Director of Jupiter Asset Management plc and currently Chief Investment Officer. Thomas Pope Honorary fellow of Trinity College Oxford. Oxford University representative on Council and Chairman of the Rugby Growth sub-committee of the CGB, Chairman of Trustees of the RFU Pension Fund, Chairman of the Player Safety and Welfare Board and a Trustee of the RFU Injured Players Foundation. Stephen is a member of London Scottish RFC.</i>
Dennis Richards	<i>Head Teacher of St. Aidans CE High School in Harrogate for 23 years. He is still heavily involved in education, employed as a Languages Assistant in another Harrogate School and a Governor of three schools.</i>
Dean Ryan	<i>RFU Head of International Player Development and responsible for leading and managing the international performance pathway to provide a pipeline of players capable of securing sustainable success for England Rugby.</i>
Mark Saltmarsh	<i>RFU Head of Education Development, previously Schools Development Manager, Regional Manager in Yorkshire and Youth Development Officer. Former player and current coach in junior rugby. Led the Age Grade Competition Review over last four years and will lead the rollout of changes to the game from this September.</i>
Henry Snow	<i>Teacher at Beaudesert Park School, Gloucestershire. Coach with Gloucestershire U16s and the Gloucester Rugby U14s & U15s DPP. Sector Head of Volunteers for the Gloucestershire RFU Management Board. Member of the RFU's National Youth Council.</i>
Vince Thorne	<i>RFU Corporate Strategy Manager, working on long term planning and business operations for the RFU. Secretariat for the Commission.</i>
Gillian Winter	<i>Former Principal of Connell College in Manchester. Developed and trialled the RFU's values resources, headed up a college and schools consortium in the North West.</i>

Appendix 2 – Feedback from the National Youth Council

Following a presentation on the background, remit and work of the U19 Commission, the National Youth Council was asked to consider what they perceived as the three to four game changers.

Four headings were highlighted as the key areas of focus: Communication, Formats, Workforce, and Transition.

Communication

- Be succinct. Focus initially on a single channel.
- **Communication alone will not fix the problems – but nothing else will succeed without good comms.**
- Know the target market but don't neglect the clubs who will need to be kept in the loop

Formats

- **Flexibility is KEY** – Need to have a modern approach – with location, with market, not try to push a one size fits all mentality
- Flexibility should not be a nice to do
- Balance of offers needs to be based on need/numbers

Workforce

- Young people need to be able to own their own rugby – through volunteering
- **CPD** – need to help coaches and refs to understand the target age group better, we have it for age grade rugby why not as young people get older?
- Our generation are increasingly focused on value for time/money so need to ensure quality of experience

Transition

- **Keep players within their own age group for longer – incentivise clubs to do this (funding etc.)**
- Encourage clubs to do flexible memberships so players can dip in and out as suits the stages they have during season e.g. exam time
- Ensure that any changes to transition do not result in the loss of competitive opportunity