County Office Report

Date – 3rd July 2023

Report compiled by Claire Sharpe

Key events, issues, and achievements since the last report. Now at stage of year where activity from the previous season is being wound up and review meetings are taking place. New season updates and planning underway so still busy even though its out of season!
Current and impending issues, events, and work streams **Mktg and Comms** New website/digital platform due to go live soon. Qrious who host old website were placed into administration in May so James is picking up all the necessary around old site/domains/platforms before the current website becomes unsupported. New website/digital to go live in July (meeting 04.07.23 to get plans for launch confirmed). **Rep Rugby** All programmes have finished! The last training session for the U17s boys had an incident whereby a member of the public (intoxicated on various substances) decided to make a nuisance of himself. This nuisance then turned into abuse and then into racial abuse directed at one of our players. Police were called, person arrested (was remanded in custody) and statements taken as the person scaled the perimeter fence and then fell, injuring himself (suspected broken leg) whilst directing this abuse at people. A number of support calls were made that evening after training (including a call to Gary to brief him on events as he was in Kosovo at the time). Further welfare follow up calls were made the next day including calls to the coaches and to the player abused and his parents. A statement was also written to the team thanking them for their restraint on the night and for their support to their teammate following this very unsavoury incident. **Rugby** Work is continuing with Dave Challenger as a full review of the rugby portfolio is underway. Progress has been made as we now have new joint chairs of age grade (Nicola Smith from Percy Park, Andrew Neal from Tynedale and John Davidson from Alnwick). The new chairs are already getting stuck in and dialled in on the Age Grade Advisary Meeting at the end of May and are part of the Community Future Engagement Forum Group.

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We have also had a CB Age Grade Meeting which was really worthwhile and allowed age grade coaches from a range of clubs and age grades to chat about issues. Notes from that meeting were circulated to age grade coaches and are attached to this report for reference.
A review meeting around Girls and Womens rugby – support structure, planning, events, budgets etc is due to take place on the 17th July.
A coaching meeting is taking place with Ash Smith and Pete Taylor on the 12th July.
These meetings will help form the plan for next season and the budgets that will sit alongside the events and projects. Budget process for "Rugby" has begun however the above two meetings need to take place and there needs to be some clarity around the Rep Rugby programme for 23-24 as currently we have no idea if format for 23-24 season is changing or staying as it was for 22-23. Formats will impact on budgets – U18s boys for instance could be stand alone fixtures or North Festivals (at the time of writing, we don't know and we don't know who we are playing).

Competitions – the end of season Presentations evening has been held at Ashington (end of May). Prior to the presentations part of the evening, a Chair of Rugby meeting took place to review cup competitions and look at ideas around 2023-24. Cup draws about to be sent out (probably in circulation by the time you read this), with work around the County Leagues and Merit table continuing (finalising league compositions with input from clubs).

Colts Leagues – Rob Parkinson has stepped down from running these and I agreed to take on the task of the administration of the leagues having discussed it with Rob and RFU staff, Lucy and Henry. A lot of time and effort has spent on this with Liam Nicholls (Club Developer) and Aaron Howorth (RFU Comps for the North). A full review of the leagues – from costs, to play offs, the scoring system and the rules was undertaken and information was sent out to the clubs in Northumberland, Cumbria and Durham in the middle of May.
Initial feedback was very good with a number of entries received within a very short timeframe. NRU Chair of Colts endorsed the changes and liked the ideas being presented to the clubs. However, Durham did not like certain aspects of what was being suggested (one thing being a £50 bond as historically Northumberland has picked up all of the costs for the leagues – which cannot continue, or the fact that clubs would have to do their own fixtures once the league compositions were agreed) and while I was on holiday a zoom meeting was called by their chair of colts with no invites to Northumberland clubs or myself, Liam or Aaron to explain the rationale for the new offerings and ideas. On the back of that zoom meet, Durham decided to create a breakaway league.
Having been updated on the situation on my return from holiday, I then had to get in touch with the two Cumbria clubs, the twelve Durham clubs and all of the Northumberland clubs who had completed entry forms to ascertain which league they were playing in – the Northumberland run/RFU endorsed league or the Durham breakaway league. All Durham teams barr one, removed themselves from the NRU/RFU league and then some of the Northumberland teams moved over.
Long story short, with seemingly more mails flying around in the background, on the 26th June those clubs who were still in the NRU/RFU endorsed league were told to join the Durham leagues as the number of teams left in the NRU/RFU endorsed league was not sustainable.
It is a shame that this has happened as a lot of time and effort was put in to give colts sides a good modern rugby offering, catering for all teams (competitive and development). It is also very disappointing to see another CB bulldozing suggestions and killing support for the new rugby offering, but then seeming to take some of the new ideas and suggestions and incorporating them into their plans. The Durham breakaway league, at the time of writing, is not an RFU endorsed league. We hope they can deliver on what is being promised.

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With the above issues around Colts rugby, some aspects of the Age Grade calendar have been delayed. A first draft of the girls calendar is out with the clubs for review and the U17/U18 calendar needs amending with reference to league weekends being removed. The Under 13-16 boys calendar is being worked on at the moment. Schools comps dates are now being added as well as we have received those along with some draft DPP dates for the U14, U15 and U16 boys.

We have also been informed of a Girls U18s league which is being run by a member of Lancashire CB. Fixture list came as a bit of a surprise as we knew nothing about it! Further investigation has got some answers but we are questioning some of the proposed playing opps within the league structure (as they don't help anyone) as well as some of the costs which seem unnecessarily high. At this stage of discussion and feeding back to RFU colleagues, the CB has not signed off on this new league (so it does not have CB endorsement).

Governance and Compliance

Ongoing support to Garys team – there is still lots going on and I am in regular contact with Mark Reade, Cathryn and Kingsley.

The CB has secured bursaries for two portable AEDs from the RFU / London Hearts project. The devices were delivered last week and will be taken to CB events and festivals.

Cathryn and I had a catch up meeting on Monday 3rd July and reviewed the CB Medical, RugbySafe and Physio budgets.

Volunteers

The Honda VtV event was held at Morpeth on the 13th May before the mens County match v Cumbria. A very successful and enjoyable day was had by all. Dougie Hall (Whitley Bay Rockcliff) won the overall volunteer of the year for the CB and has been invited to National event being held at Twickenham in September.

Mark Reade was offered tickets to the Premiership Final at Twickenham – tickets were from Gilbert as part of their sponsorship deal.

Ken Fairbairn and Gary Robson were invited to a Garden Party at Alnwick Castle (event put on to thank the many volunteers in the community). Unfortunately, Gary was unable to attend but I understand that Ken had a lovely day.

The RFU Presidents CB Volunteer of the Year nomination has been submitted – nominee will be invited to a 6 Nations match.

RFU

Continuing to work closely with Andrew, David and Liam on a number of different matters depending on who it is I am working with! I am also now in regular contact with Aaron (RFU Competitions - North).

Information is now being received on alternative forms of rugby taking place at clubs. I am pulling together the information received so with Liam and Aaron we can look to see what support can be offered to clubs.

Other work

Have also been in discussions with the new Yorkshire Chair who has been in touch seeking advice, support and clarity around how this CB operates. Andrew put Roger in touch with Lucy, Henry and I as Northumberland is now seen as a good performing CB and could help Roger with some of the issues he is dealing with.

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Met the Presidential Team with Lucy last week – range of topics discussed. Agreed to meet again in December.

Attended the joint NRU / Falcons meeting to discuss joint projects and ideas around support. Some follow up to discussions is taking place and another idea is also being developed following a separate conversation with Gav Beasley.

Funding Streams money is being allocated to various clubs across the county (and further details around who has been supported will be available in the annual report.)

Work on the Annual Report is now underway.

Work around updating club contacts for season 2023-24 is now underway and will link into the new website/digital systems.

Attended the PWC Governance workshop with Lucy, Henry and Gary. An interesting hour!

Community Game Forum Engagement Group – completed task to select a wide range of people from clubs and CB covering a range of roles. Forums are due to take place over July and August.

OldCo/Newco – working with Henry and Brian re NRU suppliers helping to ensure that contracts and information is updated.

Issues requiring Decision, Discussion or Dissemination

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NB – This report must not include personal or identifiable data as it may be appended to the Board Minutes. If there is a need to report on a Confidential matter, please forward that communication separately, marked 'Confidential'.

Notes from Age Grade Meeting held at Morpeth on Monday 15th May

(Some are notes from the group discussions, some notes are from the round the table chats and discussions)

Festivals (Minis ie, U7 to U12) – a friendly reminder …. Festivals are about participation and not about winning. Minis festivals are about enjoyment, no scores, no winners and no losers.

Social Media – please make sure posts on social media are appropriate and adhere to the core values of the game. Its great that clubs are posting on FB, but make sure that the language used is appropriate eg x club attended a festival and had a great weekend, rather than x club attended a festival at y venue and won x number of games beating a, b, c and d clubs. Emphasise the enjoyment of the game – not the winning.

Safeguarding – guidance for new coaches coming into clubs was suggested. Also safeguarding courses for those same coaches and anyone who has not done a course since returning from the enforced covid break.

Durham clubs – no paperwork required.
Tour = an overnight stay. There and back in a day is just a normal fixture.
Cross Border Forms only needed if playing teams from SRU (mostly teams in the Borders) – applies one off match or tour and applies across all age groups (adult and age grade).

Combined Teams – lengthy discussion and debate around the merits of combining age groups or a buddy up system with another club. General agreement that combined teams has not been managed well by some clubs and this has affected teams as matches have been called off last minute. Agreed that the combined ages (as well as buddy up as some clubs are doing this very successfully) would continue BUT that it would be reviewed at Christmas and if it is not being managed correctly combining age groups will be withdrawn and teams will have to "buddy up" instead. Agreement that when a form is signed off, a mail is sent out round county to say that X club at UX and UX are playing as a combined Under X team. Some clubs who don't play combined teams have not seen the combined teams form which notes how these teams should be managed – please see attached for reference (this season's form).

Just about everyone in room agreed recruitment at all age groups is needed. Apprenticeships mentioned as these roles can often be funded. Need to get into schools to offer rugby and to recruit – Ashington explained how they are doing things and the success around what they have done with access to local schools.

Referees – shortage of referees. Good idea for coaches to do the referee course when moving up to the older age groups (U13 to U16). You don't have to join the referees society. Contact Lee Weatherley if interested in following up (and check GMS coursefinder for courses).

Youth Trust – for all things age grade rugby. See attached letter for more information.

Minis Calendar – U12s are organising a waterfall – everyone participating (teams) plays for a trophy.

Age Grade Joint Chairs – we are delighted that Andrew Neal (Tynedale), Nicola Smith (Percy Park) and John Davidson (Alnwick) have agreed to be joint chairs of age grade. All three are great "go to" people as they have all held Chair of Age Grade roles at their clubs, are great at organising festivals and cups and are really good people to bounce ideas off and to approach if you have questions and need a bit of advice and/or guidance.

Meeting closed at 9pm

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