County Office Report

Date – 8th April 2024

Report compiled by Claire Sharpe

Key events, issues, and achievements since the last report.

Current and impending issues, events, and work streams

Mktg and Comms

Work is continuing on website development and content. Meeting with James scheduled this week to discuss next batch of website updates and next area for build out. Also a number of new ideas to progress following meetings with CB Age Grade Chairs and Neuro Group – will need the expertise of James to develop the ideas and ensure confidentiality is maintained when the new forms go live. Fair bit of work coming up on content additions, new ideas and updates.

Next area to be built out is the neurodiversity section – build out of this area was put on hold after January Clubs meeting so that the club support section could be built out instead.

Club Support Section continues to grow with information put into the new monthly folders and with recruitment resources and other useful updates found in this section.

As we hit the busy end of the season there will be a lot of socials and website updates and working how best to manage all of these will be discussed with James and Faye.

Rep Rugby

Continued support to that area of the game.

Under 18s boys is now complete.

Under 17s Devt Group continues – final reduction in squad numbers later this month. Squad then transfers from Devt Group to County Squad and follows that programme through May. Blyth and Gosforth have been approached to host the two home matches in May.

Under 18s Girls is now complete.

Under 16s ERDPP Girls now complete. We have been very lucky in that we managed to play complete all of our playing opps. Many other CBs were unable to unable to play all three due to the weather. Thanks to Ashington and Northern for hosting our CB matches against Durham, Cumbria and Lancashire.

Under 20s is on the go – numerous issues around regulations and eligibility of players but working through them all. First match played (v Durham) at Tynedale and now looking to the next game v Cheshire at Percy Park.

Senior Women – squad now selected. Three matches in May (one home and two away). Home match is at Morpeth.

Senior Men – starts on the 9th April. New coaching team in place. Have had meets with the two joint leads and with TM and moving forward quickly and positively in a number of areas. Three matches in May (two home and home and one away). Home matches are at Alnwick and Novos.

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Rugby

Adam Lenham (Northern) and Iain Doulgas (Ashington) have joined Nicola, John and Andrew as joint chairs of age grade covering off the girls game. Quite a lot of work going on within this group – very active Whatsapp! We held a meeting at Northern last month and discussed a number of areas to develop and a number of projects for the summer and new season. General agreement from all present that the focus areas for rugby development and sustainability at clubs is the 14-18 age groups. For the immediate end of this season, Cup Comps for these age groups were discussed and re visited in terms of what CB can cover as at present only some costs are covered off. Given the focus on these age groups it was agreed that the likes of Grand Finals days need to be good experiences for players so they finish a season enthused and looking forward to moving up to the next age grade. Group would be like to be able to say that likes of Grand Finals Days are fully funded by CB. Summer projects also thought about and need to be developed – aim is to keep players engaged so they don't disappear for three months

One project however is imminent – the "Future Colts" Festival for U16s and U17s which is being overseen by Alan Gardiner (Alnwick) and is being held on the 14th April. Looking to use Target Delivery Funding for this project.

Next project after that is the U18s Girls transition to Womens Rugby event being held prior to the County Womens match at Morpeth on the 12th May.

Season 24-25 projects need to be written up (with costs included) so they can be added to budget papers for 24-25.

Rob Parkinson also attended the meet as Chair of Colts as did Ben Drury so allowed for some linkage between club and age grade rep girls and development around ideas for projects. Really good 2 ½ hours with a lot discussed and a lot of positivity.

Myself, Ben, Iain and Adam have been invited onto the RWC 2025 Working Group for Northumberland, Cumbria and Durham.

Age Grade Forum meet now in diary – Tuesday 7th May – tyring to get Northern as venue.

I am in touch with Chad (local Honda General Manager) re Minis Festivals and goodie bags/medals – see what support Honda can offer as they supported events last season and are keen to be involved again at local level. Goodie bags have not come off however Chad has been able to find some financial support for medals so are sponsoring the medals for the Morpeth hosted events and cars from the Morpeth Honda branch on site on the 7th and 14th April. Morpeth also including shout out to Honda in their festival programmes, on the day speeches and on socials.

County, CANDY and Merit Leagues – Poll put onto whatsapp asking if clubs wanted me to continue to oversee the admin of the leagues. 31 votes for yes and 0 for no! Also have polls on the go re revised points scoring system standardising across all leagues (again overwhelming support to that from the participating clubs 22 yes and 0 no) and whether or not to host a fixtures night. Also some discussion around rules amends (regarding "ringers" on weekends when 1st teams are not playing). Entries for season 24-25 are being confirmed now and following suggestion from participating clubs a CANDY3 North and CANDY 3 South have been introduced for next season which should reduce size of CANDY 2 South (its way too big) as some teams have already moved across to the new lower level league. CANDY 3 North is essentially the Aln League re named. Is encouraging to see some new teams coming into the fold for next season so all looking positive there.

Club Development Day at Morpeth was a success with some good positive feedback from clubs. Also gave me the opportunity to catch up with a number of people at clubs as well as RFU and

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gave the opportunity for the brainstorm around the club planning day for end of July – started out as idea of a two day coaching conference but has now morphed into another club support day where a number of opportunities will be offered to clubs to attend either RFU courses, some coach CPD or some presentations around pertinent topics. The aim is to get club coaches ready for the new season so they don't get bombarded with info in September. Is for age grade and adult coaches, male and female game. Venue is confirmed (Northern) and date (27th and 28th July) – now working on the schedule and what can be offered over the course of the two days.

There is lots going on within the rugby portfolio – information above is just a snapshot of activity and support being offered through the office.

Governance and Compliance
Continued support to those working within this portfolio.
Safeguarding and RugbySafe systems that have been further refined this season have come into play recently with a number of second and in one case third concussions identified within the season/year. Has allowed for additional support to be offered to parents / players. A reminder was sent out to all clubs re concussions paperwork as some clubs who use the ProActive App are not completing the CB paperwork. The App does not speak to the CB so we are unaware of potential safeguarding / rugbysafe issues if players ignore advice or go back too soon. The systems we have in place allow us to go back to parents when challenged (as we have been recently) and they say that their child is fine and can play.

There have been 143 reported concussions so far this season.

Lots going on in terms of support to Mark Reade on Safeguarding matters – daily "am" catch ups with him so both of us up to speed on any matters.

We are starting to see more cases where neuro diversity support is required so the work this group is undertaking is really going to become invaluable. Mark as CBSM is supporting the work we are doing with he and I liaising on this when issues arise as he has also flagged that this is a growing area of work within the RFU. We already have first parent using "Player on a Page" and we are developing out other ideas we have had at our recent neuro group meetings.
The SEMH Policy is now finished and is being presented to Board for ratification.
As well as finalising the policy the group has also developed an idea of an on line inclusion form – where someone can get in touch if they want some help or advice. That form will sit in the neuro section of the site but will also be found in the forms section (logical place to go looking).
Should be noted that members of the group have taken heart from the really good feedback and engagement from coaches and CSOs who can see what the group is trying to do by way of developing support within the club environment. The group is using some of the negative feedback as starting points for explanation within sections on the website (neuro diversity section build out) and as starting point of the presentation to be given at the age grade forum meet.

Reminders have gone out re tours and cross border matches – seems to have worked as more forms are now being received. Paperwork is required for any matches involving teams from SRU – whether you are hosting or travelling, one off match or tour, adult or age grade. For some reason the "incoming cross border" for hosting teams are the ones that clubs seem to forget!

Volunteers
The Gilbert tickets for Falcons matches have been well received! To date, Mark Reade (Safeguarding), Simon Cox (Friday Night Vets), Ben Drury (Womens and Girls Rep lead coach) and John Austin (County player photos) have all been to matches. The additional four tickets for the

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Leicester match were given to Lee Hill (neuro group) and to Mark Reade (CBSM) as unfortunately he was unwell for the first match he was offered.

The Honda Value the Volunteer scheme is closed and the top three nominations sent to the RFU. Some excellent nominations in this year – and more than last year which is really encouraging. The VtV event will be held on the 29th May as part of the end of season presentations evening. Venue confirmed on Friday – Morpeth RFC.

Simon Cox was nominated for the "watch the England team train" volunteer thank you. The nomination was successful and he got to watch the team train at Pennyhill Park in February.

I learnt last week that Mark Reade has been invited to a *Volunteer Recognition Lunch on the 24th May at Twickenham, hosted by RFU President Rob Briers, to recognise volunteers within the game who have been instrumental in supporting key areas (including safeguarding, discipline, RugbySafe, education, competition development & Women & Girls), and who have been put forward by the relevant RFU department.*

RFU
Continuing to work closely with Andrew, David and Liam on a number of different matters.

The 6 weekly catch up calls with RFU staff continue and continue to be useful to everyone.

Other work
Autum raffle to be launched early May – likely tickets for South Africa.
End of Season Presentations evening – need to start to look at that.
Honda VtV Event – need to start to work on that now that date and venue are confirmed.
Competitions – Cups – meeting with Ken Fraser, Paul Walker and Andy McDonough on 9th April.
Club Support Weekend – developing out that plan.

Generally, work continues to support the portfolios of the Directors and of the Chair and Hon Secretary. I am busy as ever with lots on the go with hopefully everything moving in the right direction. Information above is just a snapshot of what is going on.

Issues requiring Decision, Discussion or Dissemination

Can we please get an official working group together for competitions. We need to get a small group overseeing Comps with people on it who can give me answers quickly when I refer to them. Right now we have finals coming up and I have no idea where the bases are for some of the silverware, if the bases when located are engraved, why the bases are not with the silverware I have in here, whether or not the CANDY League trophies are legacy trophies or yearly trophies. There are also increasing demands for decisions around dates and venues.

As we approach the end of the season, the current board reaches the end of their term. I am keen to continue with work on modernisation and streamlining of CB operations. The new digital and on line systems have ensured the CB and its systems are legal and compliant. It has been very hard work, but it has also been very rewarding as I have been allowed to lead on some of this (eg the website/digital platform).
On Friday last week I had a lengthy catch up and planning meeting with James to discuss further development on areas of the new website / digital platform and work begins on this, this week. Some of the items discussed will become available over the next month or so, but others will take a bit of time before they become live as they need to be built and tested.

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New ideas around social media announcements were also discussed and work on that begins this week too as there are a number of actions to follow up on to get to a stage where we can try the new ideas.
I hope the new Board continue to support the work being done to develop our on-line presence and digital systems supporting clubs, coaches and players with the relevant on line documents and information, being legal and compliant, and ensuring player welfare is at the forefront of any decision making process.

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'.

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