Annual Report - Director of Marketing, Communications and Sponsorship.

My vision when I came on board three years ago was to change the focus on what we do to revolve around our digital presence and especially to direct and channel people towards the CB's website rather than to the County Office via telephone, e-mail or in person. This meant upgrading our overall digital offering to drag some people, kicking and screaming in a few cases, into the modern world.

This also meant moving away from paper-based records and forms which was obviously a good thing from a time, environmental, cost, and ease of storage point of view and funnelling people to the Website, WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook on-line presences for information and guidance. This approach also meant that our County Administrator, Claire, had more time to focus on matters more related to Rugby than just administration.

The old County website was clunky, tired, expensive to host, and not fit for purpose in the c21 st, so, following on from what my predecessor, Penny Stewart, had started exploring before she moved to become our RFU Council Representative, I looked at replacing it with a modern version as a basic starting point- despite a few objections to the cost involved.

The new website is easy to use (bar the odd glitch on mobile phones which is being worked through), has a huge amount more functionality and capacity, should last us around another fifteen years, and is now moving towards being fully on stream although this is an ongoing and evolving process.

This is evidenced by the numbers using it- in the brief few months since launch over 1 ,000 documents have been accessed through the website and

- 1 ,700 clicks through to the site from Google (in the last month).
- The website appeared on Google search results pages over 33,000 times.
- The homepage got over 100 more clicks than the previous month.
- The site got over 130 more clicks than last month from the search term Northumberland rugby.

The website will be the hub of an awful lot that we do going forward under communications and marketing as a CB. Under the six main headers, "About, Club Rugby, Club Support, Governance, News and Events" it will hold the vast majority of information that clubs, officials, coaches, players and supporters will ever need to access - including RFU and other courses, Club Competition rules, Board and other Committee papers and documents, the Constitution, Safeguarding, Officials, Game

on, the CANDY leagues, Youth and Mini Rugby and Governance and all club details which the old County Handbook used to hold (which I stopped being produced at a cost of £2,000 and several weeks of Claire's admin time spent collating).

It will also enable clubs and coaches to submit necessary paperwork and have it signed off by the correct County official on-line using Docusign as well as offering secure storage facilities on the Cloud.

I am keen to develop closer links between the CB and NRURS - without referees we simply don't have games! We are developing a Referees section (Referees' Corner) to mirror what they are putting on their site regarding training and law changes, as well as talking to them about Coach education, their Kit supplier and generally how we support and work together for the development of rugby in the CB.

Displayed in a prime position on the website is the Northumberland RFU Gilbert Shop. The revenue from sales has increased substantially over the last couple of years following my renegotiation of the contract, but I want this to grow even more- especially at key times of the year- i.e. the start of the season, Christmas and during the County season with special offers including wine offerings and bundles of kit.

In our first full season (under the old contract) we achieved our target (just) and received a 15% Gift of Kit- some £l ,800. Since then, I have renegotiated the target and we now will receive a GoK irrespective of Sales figures, on a sliding scale, in an effort to ensure that the County has at some income coming in when our sales are lower in any one season.

With regard to setting up the new County website, the process has been led by a small team of individuals, including Claire Sharpe, James Barnett and Faye Wheatley the latter two of Aspire Digital Marketing (James being the MD and Owner of the company and Faye the person charged with designing and running our social media presence for us- with Claire's and my oversight).

Aspire not only set the website up, but help share posts, maintain, and are training Claire on its use. Aspire also sponsor the County and James (a Seghill man) and Faye have both been hugely helpful both in their professionalism but also their enthusiasm in the ongoing project.

It has been commented by an RFU Official that the Northumberland website and social media presence generally is now up there with the best in the country- and, as we know imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, other CB's are now mirroring what we do.

I negotiated a new contract with Gilbert, who now get all of our business direct, rather than part of it going to a middleman, thus achieving better terms than we 'd ever previously enjoyed and which, based on the previous contract's sales volumes last year would potentially make us £l ,300 p.a better off.

The Gilbert contract also now offers a range of supplementary benefits, including complimentary tickets to some International games as well as tickets for Falcons home matches, all of which have been distributed to our Volunteers to say thank you.

Gilbert also offer supplementary benefits such as free returns, special offers and discounts.

I have agreed and signed up the biggest sponsorship deal that the CB has ever had with Penny Petroleum and, working with Claire - who has proved extremely adept at this - we have managed to secure a number of smaller, but still valued and valuable new sponsors and I understand that revenue from this is the largest that the CB has ever achieved.

We have also increased revenue by instituting a number of simple things, like asking County players to support the CB by putting their hands in their pockets to buy a Gilbert Photon T shirt to travel to games in — all of which helps us towards our GoK.

The CB also launched a Small Lottery (this wasn't my idea to be honest) but I was asked to set it up with Northumberland County Council to enable the CB to raffle International Tickets the CB had purchased. It made a small profit, which was a good result for the first time it had been trialled and will be repeated for the Autmn Interntationals where I expect the returns to be greater.

It was and is my view that we need the County to be more relevant to the Clubs and we should therefore not just publicise the CB through its events and matches on social media but also post anything that is Rugby related from our constituent clubs to increase our engagement with and promote them. This has been positively received by the clubs and we were even asked by some Durham clubs if they could post on our sites (we said no, of course!).

The number of people looking at our Facebook page as a result has also increased hugely and continues to grow- from 1035 in Nov 21 to 1800 now- an increase of 74% and I expect that to continue to grow. X (Twitter) users have also risen though not as sharply, as have people looking at the CB on Instagram, from 1416 to 1817 (up 28%).

The more traffic we get through our social media and especially our website, the greater the opportunity we have of attracting sponsors and selling our goods through the County shop as well as the better the relationships we can foster with our clubs.

When I took office, we had a plethora of WhatsApp and Facebook groups for County and Area teams which were unregulated but were under the Northumberland RFU banner- and were therefore a potential danger to the CB under GDPR. These were all shut down and specific groups set up for Squads with the right level of oversight by CB officials. These have now bedded in and are well used- and regulated.

Similarly, it was important to ensure that any old e-mail addresses- with holders being former County officials- were shut down to ensure that we were operating legally under GDPR, i.e information was being held for a specific purpose, was within the time constraints allowable, was still needed, and that people who could access it as Data Controllers had the right to do so.

I have renegotiated the Team of the Month Award with the Falcons over the last three years with the successful teams winning 20 tickets to a Falcons match of choice.

I also write a Northumberland County Rugby page in every Falcons programme highlighting clubs and individuals who have done something special and deserve mention as well as publicising special events at Clubs, publicising County matches and the results of Team of the Month.

Coming on board, like most of the Board, at a time of some considerable turmoil towards the end of Covid and following the previous Board's mass resignation, did create some issues and it took me a while to get my feet under the table and decide how best I could work, with whom and what I was going to focus on. I am indebted to Penny Stewart, our RFU Council Rep and Claire Sharpe as well as my fellow Directors for their support at that time.

Three years down the line I feel that I have achieved a fair amount of what I wanted to however there is a lot more I still want to do- and I do feel that I still have unfinished business.

If re- elected I will continue with the work I started to engage all the partners in Rugby in the CB and make sure that we give them maximum exposure across as many digital formats as we can and that the CB and rugby in the County generally is promoted in the best light we can.

I want to grow the revenue streams coming into the CB by focusing on opportunities for income generation and sponsorship to a greater extent with professionally produced Sponsorship packages to appeal to the corporate world. I intend to include targeted approaches to professionals such as Lawyers, Financial Advice firms

and or Mortgage Brokers in particular, as well as looking at other ideas such as individual player sponsorship deals.

I think our presentation to these potential stakeholders needs to be modern, focused, coherent and punchy.

I think the idea of looking at a professional fund raiser should be considered, with advice sought and a cost benefit analysis carried out to see if this is a feasible path to go down.

I want to grow the County's Membership, which has been declining, back to at least a pre-Covid level. The offering needs to be sharpened up to make it appealing and I have a number of ideas which need developing on that- including ID cards (ready to go and to be worked on over the Summer), free entry into the next lottery for international tickets when a membership is taken out for the first time, and or a free Programme/ Butty/ Pint at a County game on production of the membership card.

The Presidential Team is organising a Former County Players Reunion for which I am unfortunately away on holiday, but I have asked them to promote the benefits of County Membership at that event.

I feel that we are still a long way short of marketing the enormous positives and joy in playing the game to the wider public as these have been subsumed by the negativity around some aspects of the physical side of it. Those joys are specifically encapsulated in the RFU mantra of TREDS- Teamwork, Respect, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship but you could also add Friendship, Fitness and Support to that acronym.

We need to work hard to unlock partnerships to promote the game which has undoubtedly taken a battering with both professional and amateur clubs failing (although not in our CB), Covid reducing numbers of male community players involved, an increasingly complex game and the fear of concussive injuries leading to permanent health issues, brain damage and worse in what is still regarded by some as a brutal contact sport.

In that light I also want to promote other forms of rugby including Touch and Walking Rugby. Inclusion and Diversity policies will be key factors in securing sponsorship.

I intend to grow the focus on these areas alongside continuing to reflect the rapid growth in the Women and Girls game- a major success story with teams like the Northern Valkeryies.

I think it is important for County Officials to be known and recognised in the rugby fraternity and I intend to be as visible as I can amongst the Clubs and to that end, I have offered to accompany the Presidential team at Club and County visits this

season and have attended County matches when asked to do so in the past. This enables me to talk to Club officials (both in and outside Northumberland) about what they do, how they market themselves, where their sponsorship comes from and their success stories- as well as ask them what support they need -and I also get to enjoy a game of rugby "sans microphone" for a change.

It is important we keep relevant to the youth of today- they are the senior players of tomorrow and the administrators of next year, We need to be aware of and keep up to speed with what and how they use to communicate/ The website contains a guide on how to set up and use Tik Tok for example, which, along with Instagram and X (Twitter) I think we need to be looking at how to exploit next to best effect.

For the past thirteen years I have worked as a match day Summariser and more recently, Commentator, for BBC Radio Newcastle as well as doing Radio 5 Sports Extra three or four times a year. I take pride that I showcase the Community game in our coverage (I can vouch that most of the other stations don't bother) and regularly feature local rugby news stories as well as scores and match reports from games in the region as well as interviewing/ using clips from interviews with officers of the County, including Penny Stewart, RFU Council Rep, Ruth Scott, President and Lucy Armstrong, Chair as well as officials from other rugby clubs.

This season, for example, I have featured Ashington, for their efforts to raise the profile of and fundraise for Dementia UK in their "Game for Albert" (Armstrong of course), and the Ravens, to promote LBTQ+ Rugby and their Hadrian Festival, Wallsend in the development of the Club, their Foundation and their magnificent Papa John's National Cup Final win at the DMP Arena, which I was at, as well as promoting charitable local events such as Spoonfest for children's Rugby Charity, the Wooden Spoon Society and Will Welch's Testimonial Dinner in June which is raising money for the My Name'5 Doddie and Bravehearts of the North East.

Dean Gray

Director of Communications, Marketing and Sponsorship