DIRECTOR OF GOVERNANCE REPORT

JUNE 2024

1. Introduction

1.1. As the 2023 – 2024 season concludes, it is important to look back over the previous season, celebrate successes where appropriate, and also to reflect upon any lessons which can be learned to enhance future rugby in Northumberland.

1.2. This season also sees the conclusion of my three-year tenure as Director of Governance. At the end of last season, I indicated that I would not seek re-appointment as Director beyond this season. I would like to take this opportunity to thank those volunteers who have been involved with the Governance Panel since 2020, and also to congratulate Mark Reade who, subject to ratification at the AGM, will take over as Director of Governance.

1.3. Rugby Union continues to evolve rapidly and has seen a drastic change, even in recent years. Society has also changed, particularly following the covid pandemic. Expectations regarding rugby, from players (both young and old), parents of youngsters playing the sport, coaches, teachers, and other volunteers who deliver the game in clubs and schools, across constituency bodies and nationally, are also evolving and are very different from even a decade ago.

1.4. Upon appointment in 2020, I made a conscious effort to move away from the historic practice of a Governance Committee which met regularly and discussed a wide range of issues, not all of which were directly relevant to supporting and developing rugby in Northumberland.

1.5. It was decided to change and operate as a Governance Panel, focusing on those portfolio areas which directly supported players and the playing of the game, in a safe and secure environment, compliant with legislation and RFU regulations, reinforcing throughout best practices and the rugby values of teamwork, respect, enjoyment, discipline and sportsmanship.

1.6. Before reporting on the work which has been undertaken in each of the respective portfolio areas, I want to highlight some aspects which have underpinned the support provided to all clubs in Northumberland and also the improvement of CB delivery across all Governance Panel portfolios.

1.7. Claire Sharpe, as county administrator, has been integral to the successful delivery of all governance functions and the coordination of relevant

communications with clubs and between the governance portfolios. In this context, Claire has worked closely with James (Aspire Digital) to rebuild the NRU website and create a digital solution for regulatory authorities (e.g., tours, playing up, etc). Claire is also the secure GDPR-compliant, central repository for issues relating to safeguarding and adult discipline. Claire and James have done a great job and should be congratulated.

2. Safeguarding

2.1. Mark Reade has been the CB Safeguarding Manager (CBSM) for the past two years. Mark is supported by a network of Club Safeguarding Officers (CSOs) present in all clubs across Northumberland. I do not want to get wrapped up in statistics, however, the number of safeguarding issues, referred to Mark, has risen exponentially since he took up the post.

2.2. Ordinarily, such a rise in cases would be a grave concern, however, there are several underlying factors. Similarly to all of the Governance Panel portfolios, Mark has encouraged Clubs and CSOs to discuss any concerns they have, all issues raised are now captured and recorded. This is best practice and often words of advice are all that is required to resolve a situation.

2.3. Following high-profile cases and significant failings concerning safeguarding issues (e.g., Saville, Rotheram, Religious groups etc) there is now a far greater willingness on the part of everyone to raise any safeguarding concern at an early stage. Again this is best practice and to be encouraged.

2.4. Sadly, there has been an increase in safeguarding issues within Northumberland, including some that have resulted in police investigations and the removal of individuals from involvement in rugby.

2.5. It would not be appropriate to disclose details of specific cases, or the circumstances surrounding them in this format. However, I would like to reiterate my thanks to Mark Reade and the CSO network for their contribution over the past season and their support during my tenure.

2.6. As outgoing Director of Governance, I can reassure everyone connected with rugby in Northumberland that all safeguarding regulations and best practice has been an overarching priority and I hope that will continue in the future.

2.7. Mark Reade, attended a Honda Volunteer Recognition lunch held at Twickenham Stadium, hosted by RFU President Rob Briers. The citation from the RFU reads: "Mark demonstrates a tireless enthusiasm for safe practice as CB Safeguarding Manager for Northumberland and can always be counted on to offer the highest level of support to the RFU Safeguarding Team, following up with clubs and working collaboratively to ensure the needs of children and volunteers are met."

3. Discipline

3.1. Adult discipline in Northumberland is administered by Kinglsey Hyland who is the Discipline Secretary (CBDS) and is supported by the Discipline Panel, chaired by Alan Beddis. The CBDS has provided a detailed report which will be available as an attachment to this report.

3.2. I wish to express gratitude to Kingsley, Alan and the Discipline Panel for their considerable, often unseen, efforts in this and previous seasons.

3.3. Sadly, the Discipline Panel lost two hugely valued members this season with the passing of former Discipline Chair Alan Lockey (right) and Malcolm Jarvie (left). Both were stalwarts of Northumberland rugby and are irreplaceable.

3.4. The number of adult red cards and citings, resulting in appearances before the Disciplinary Panel, dropped significantly in the 2023-24 season, to a total of 16 cases. It is hoped that this indicates that players' conduct is improving, however, it is recognised that other underlying factors could exist, like a reduction in the number of adult matches being played.

3.5. There was an encouraging reduction in the number of dangerous tackle cases, which suggests that the change in the tackle height law at the community game level has had a positive effect.

3.6. Whilst there appears to have been a marked improvement in adult on-field conduct, touchline behaviour, particularly at age-grade games, remains a growing problem, often linked to allegations of match official abuse. It is hoped that a planned rollout of RFU 'Active Bystander Training' will address this.

3.7. Another significant feature of adult cases has been the increased availability of video evidence. This has proved to be of significant assistance in discipline cases.

3.8. Previous seasons saw a proliferation of cases involving breaches of RFU Regulation 15 (playing up or down without CB approval). This resulted in league point deductions for some clubs. This season there has only been one case. The improved CB digital authorisation system aids clubs in remaining compliant and enhances the ability to identify clubs that breach regulation 15.

3.9. NRU are very fortunate that the CBDS, Kingsley Hyland, is acknowledged nationally as being a subject matter expert in rugby discipline issues. In this context, he was invited to be involved in an RFU-led working group, undertaking a major review and rewrite of Regulation 19 (Discipline). At the time of writing the final draft is undergoing proofreading, this will go before the RFU Council for approval on 14th June. It is pleasing to report that there has been a direct Northumberland input into these national issues.

3.10. A less encouraging feature of the season has been the number of cases involving adult behaviour at age-grade games where there has been a crossover with safeguarding issues, this will be the subject of further comment in later paragraphs.

3.11. Age-grade discipline issues are less clear at Northumberland CB level. Chris Davy has performed the role of age-grade discipline secretary (AGDS) for many years. There has, historically, been a 'dotted line' reporting by the AGDS, via the CBDS to the Governance Panel, and subsequently the NRU board.

3.12. The county administrator and CBSM are not currently fully sighted on all age-grade discipline issues and cases. On occasion, this lack of communication has been problematic. Efforts have been made to resolve these communication issues at a local delivery level and the NRU board level. In February 2024 the issues were highlighted by me to the RFU Head of Discipline. They remain unresolved.

3.13. The AGDS has reported, via CBDS, that there were 13 age-grade discipline cases last season.

3.14. Increasingly, there is a trend that cases of age-grade discipline (i.e., an incident during an age-grade game), escalate into adult discipline issues, due to allegations of match official abuse, or parent/coach behaviour. Often there are associated safeguarding or neurodiversity issues involving the youngster(s) involved.

3.15. One case in particular highlighted all of these issues and, without the timely intervention of the CBSM, could have resulted in a significant negative impact on the youngster involved, his family and consequential reputational damage to NRU, the RFU and all involved.

3.16. There is an overarching legislative obligation and duty of care upon NRU, and it's representatives, to ensure that 'the welfare of the child is paramount' in all policies and procedures. To fully achieve this NRU communication procedures concerning age-grade discipline issues must be more coordinated and child-centric.

3.17. In April 2024 a working group was appointed by the NRU board, to be led by Lee Wetherley and included the CBSM and CBDS representatives, to examine the following issues and report back to the board in advance of next season.

- NRU delivery of RFU Active Bystander Training
- Consideration of impact upon NRU of the ongoing RFU review of Regulation 19
- Communication with Clubs & Stakeholders
- Communication between Safeguarding (including Neurodiversity), Discipline (Adult & Age Grade) and Administration Portfolios
- Age Grade Discipline Procedures in NRU, including the role of AGDS.

4. Rugby Safe & CB Medical

4.1. RugbySafe & CB medical issues are overseen by Cathryn Clark. For several years Cathryn has been trying to reduce her rugby workload and concentrate on her own business.

4.2. Soon after taking on this role, I recognised that clubs in Northumberland were potentially missing out on available funding for First Aid Courses, AED devices (defibrillators) and guidance relating to vital issues at club level i.e, risk assessments, impacting on health and safety at clubs.

4.3. Understandably, there were some ‘mutterings’ across Northumberland about this, although no one volunteered to grip the issue. I asked Cathryn to assist and she agreed. The result is all Northumberland clubs now have had access to funded RFU emergency first aid courses and life-saving devices in Northumberland clubs.

4.4. Similarly to other Governance portfolio leads, Cathryn is approachable and provides advice to clubs relating to all rugbysafe issues, risk assessments, first aid courses and requirements related to medical issues.

4.5. Cathryn has provided workshops and attended the club development day, along with other portfolio leads.

4.6. Cathryn now also oversees the fantastic physio team that attend all CB and rep rugby events. This team are now adequately resourced to deal with all issues likely to be encountered during a game of rugby. The physio team now have access to specialist medical resources which enable them to deal with trauma and potential spinal injury.

4.7. The CB medical team can now adequately resource multiple venues and does not need to allocate specialist resources according to intuition.

4.8. Historically, medical supplies and resources were obtained and allocated on a piecemeal ‘team by team’ basis. This resulted in a huge waste of CB resources which has now ceased, with central control and coordination around procurement and puchasing.

4.9. I would also like to express my gratitude to Cathryn, the Rugbysafe club reps and the physio team.

5. Injured Player Welfare

5.1. Injured player welfare is an area that Northumberland CB does not currently have adequate resources to support. During my tenure, there has not been an ability to develop any individual to focus solely on injured player welfare issues. Although a budget was secured to assist in any relevant cases, Claire, as county administrator, has maintained contact with injured players over the past season, and other Governance Panel members have attempted to support them when needed. I respectfully suggest the incoming board needs to consider this as a priority. I will not tempt fate, however, history tells us a significant injury may occur at any time.

6. Neurodiversity

6.1. Last season it was recognised that Neurodiversity issues were a cross-cutting theme in a range of rugby and governance situations that were being encountered within the CB.

6.2. Situations were being encountered like age-grade coaches enquiring, ‘B has ADHD what do I do?’, ‘W is autistic and had a meltdown – should I have sent him off?’. Senior team coaches were enquiring how to deal with a player who had previously attempted suicide. There was no apparent RFU guidance or resource available. We set up a small, time-fixed ‘task and finish’ group to explore this issue, overseen by Claire Sharpe.

6.3. The neurodiversity working group has done a fantastic job and has provided a plethora of advice and resources, which will assist in these situations until the governing body catches up. I would like to thank everyone involved in this piece of work.

6.4. There has been some criticism that the neurodiversity group workshop delivery at a General Committee forum was not appropriate for that group. I will accept that feedback, however, the reported treatment of that group of volunteers was not in accordance with rugby values.

6.5. I respectfully suggest that neorodiversity is an issue which will be increasingly prevalent in future. It is a matter for the incoming board, however, I would recommend neurodiversity becomes a permanent portfolio area.

7. Conclusion

7.1. I submit this report for your information and action as you deem appropriate.

7.2. I thank you for your attention and consideration of the points raised.

7.3. I reiterate my thanks to Claire Sharpe, Mark Reade, Kingsley Hyland and Cathryn Clark.

7.4. I wish Mark Reade, NRU and the incoming board the very best of luck and success for the future.

Gary Robson
02.06.24