NORTHUMBERLAND SCHOOL TO CLUB TRANSITION GUIDANCE 2026

Liam Nicholls – RFU Club Developer

EFFECTIVE TRANSITION

- What does this look like?

- Tips to improve our offer?

- Models of good Practice?

What is effective school to club transition?

"An effective transition from school to a rugby club means helping a young person move into a rugby club in a way that is positive, safe, and enjoyable. A good transition helps young people feel comfortable, included, and excited to take part, encouraging them to stay active and enjoy rugby for the long term."

Doing this can create a player pipeline for many years to come…

Build Strong School–Club Partnerships

- **Why it works: Young people are far more likely to join clubs they already know and trust.**

- **Key actions**

- Formal agreements between schools and local clubs (shared facilities, coaching support).
- Clubs assisting with curriculum PE units or extracurricular sessions in schools.
- Schools actively promoting specific local clubs, not just sport in general.

- **Key principle:** Familiarity reduces anxiety and drop-out.

Use “Bridging Experiences”

- **Why it works: Sudden transitions can feel intimidating.**

- **Key actions**

- Taster sessions at clubs during school time.
- After-school sessions run jointly by school staff and club coaches, bring the club to the school first.
- Short transition programs (e.g. 6–8 weeks) where students attend club sessions as a group.

- **Key principle:** Transition should feel like continuation, not a leap.

Align Coaching Approaches and Expectations

- **Why it works: Young people often drop out when club sport feels too competitive or unfamiliar.**

- **Key actions**

- Coach education focused on youth-centered, inclusive approaches.
- Clear communication about differences between school and club sport (rules, commitment, competition).
- Multiple participation pathways (social, development, competitive).
- Not all players want to play ‘contact’ rugby, but do want to be involved in ‘rugby’.

- **Key principle:** Development and enjoyment first, not early selection.

Reduce Practical Barriers

- **Why it works: Logistics and cost are among the biggest reasons young people do not continue.**

- **Key actions**

- Subsidised fees or “first season free” schemes.
- Club ‘Transition’ Voucher… any associated benefits… (Measurement)
- Equipment-loan / exchange programmes.
- Transport solutions (walking buses, car-share coordination).
- Training times aligned with school schedules.

- **Key principle:** Motivation is irrelevant if access is blocked.

Leverage Peer Influence

- **Why it works: Young people are strongly influenced by friends.**

- **Key actions**

- Encourage group sign-ups from the same school or class.
- Buddy systems linking new members with existing junior players.
- Youth ambassadors who have successfully transitioned.
- Incentivised recruitment… (3 games t-shirt / 8 games hoody?)

- **Key principle:** Belonging is as important as sport skill.

Engage Parents and Guardians Early

- **Why it works: Parents are often the decision-makers and facilitators.**

- **Key actions**

- Clear, simple communication about time commitment, costs, and benefits.
- Parent information evenings jointly hosted by schools and clubs.
- Emphasising social, health, and personal development benefits—not just performance.
- Parents social events, bring them into the club also.

- **Key principle:** Confident parents create confident participants.
- **Side Benefit:** You may get additional volunteers from this for the club.

Focus on Positive First Experiences

- **Why it works: Early club experiences strongly affect long-term retention.**

- **Key actions**

- Welcoming induction sessions.
- Small-sided games and inclusive activities.
- Avoid early deselection or ‘trial’ sessions.
- Celebrate effort and improvement.

- **Key principle:** Enjoyment drives sustained participation.

Use Data and Follow-Up

- **Why it works: Transitions fail when no one checks what happened next.**

- **Key actions**

- Track which students attend taster sessions and join clubs and why.
- Follow up with non-joiners to understand potential barriers.
- Continuous feedback loops between schools and clubs.

- **Key principle:** What gets measured gets improved.

Model of Good Practice

Mersea Island – Midlands

MERSEA ISLAND KEY PRINCIPLES

- DoR reached out and established relationships with local schools to set up training sessions on schools site.
- Training at the club supported by age grade club coaches.
- Encouraged Mersea Cup takes place to wrap up the year and see how far the players have progressed.
- The latest event had over 60 boys playing with over half not registered at the club
- Transition started with invitations to parents to bring players to training/ meet and greet session at the club.

https://www.mersearugby.com/news/mersea-cup-2025-2956268.html

Mersea Island – Success Factors

- MIRFC has increased their commitment to support coaching in these school over the last 3 seasons, with both curriculum and afterschool clubs.
- The great partnership between the schools has seen over 20% growth in the MIRFC junior section from these 2 secondary schools alone.
- This has instilled a decent rivalry between the two secondary schools, enhanced greatly by the host of current Mersea rugby players in their ranks.
- Work also directed towards local primary schools too so that ‘Rugby’ is seen as an option at an earlier age for these young individuals. Building the foundations for secondary school activity.
- Celebration of the event with schools, clubs, parents all invited along to the spectacle of the ‘head to head’ day.
- Early follow up with players / parents and capturing their data to allow effective communication around further opportunities and upcoming events.

QUESTIONS & THANK YOU!

England
Rugby