

## **RFU COUNCIL MEMBER FOR KENT COUNTY RFU: ANNUAL REPORT**

### **SEASON 2019-20 - ROGER CLARKE**

#### **1. GENERAL**

This season, as all will know, has been one like no other for our 70 member clubs, for the County Executive and for the RFU due to the Corona virus pandemic arriving in England and causing the game to close down from March 15<sup>th</sup>. All of my planned visits towards the end of the season, the Men's and Women's County Championships, Awards Events and scheduled meetings were affected, with the only one of these to continue being an increased number of meetings by Zoom.

All of our Kent RFU RDOs and CRCs have been furloughed and are sadly, due to the RFU potential loss of some £70-107m, now going through a selection for redundancy programme, which is likely to hit the Community part of the game hard and see some 141 of the RFU staff leaving their employment. These were strange times for our Area Manager Jo Martin to be moving on to a new role outside the RFU and for her replacement Kirsty Goldie-Brammer to join us. We know her well from Zoom but have yet to physically welcome her to County meetings.

Much time and effort with County colleagues has been put into creating a Covid Emergency Relief fund, jointly funded by the RFU and Kent through its reserves, providing advice on the RFU emergency loans programme, the Sport England loans available and on the availability in a number of instances of direct Government support based on the level of rate payment.

Recently, I have been part of an RFU Working Group which has taken on the task of ensuring, as we start the 2020-21 season, that the remaining CB/RFU funds across the country are available – probably until the end of the season for Clubs who suffer financially because of the pandemic (£1m). Our aim is to ensure that the RFU loan fund (£4.7m) is available for the most effective projects and that a new support fund (£2m) is available to fund the Nat West Rugby Force weekend on the 5<sup>th</sup> September, and to fund club projects that look in the main at future club development. There is still, therefore, money available, despite the financial position to the tune of close to £8m for the Community game. This is though in a County context a difficult financial period as we have lost close to £120k of income currently for the 2020-21 season and have had to cut our activities and budgets accordingly.

In these unprecedented times I have worked both as your RFU Councillor and as your Chair of the Executive Committee, along with colleagues on the various County Committees to ensure that all clubs are regularly briefed on the progress being made to restart the game and on the work being carried out in consulting Government in order to make progress in going through the various stages to fully restart the game and return to full crowds at games on a Saturday afternoon.

In Kent, we have determined that during this period we should set up 5 geographical clusters of clubs and a cluster for the Women's and Girls' game, to be led by experienced volunteers who are now holding regular briefing and consultation meetings via the County Zoom account. In addition, over 10% of those involved in the game in Kent took part in a survey in June to judge the game's mood and appetite in relation to return to play. This level of response and the data we were able to obtain from players and administrators has been and will be invaluable in the journey towards restarting effectively. Clearly and sadly, that will not be on the 5<sup>th</sup> September, because of the amount of body / physical contact in our game. As I write this, we hope that we can convince Government to adopt some form of variant of the game as part of our

journey, which can be played as part of an interim stage towards a full and competitive restart.

## **2. ACTIVITIES DURING THE YEAR BEFORE CLOSE DOWN**

As part of my role as Councillor, and before close down on the 15<sup>th</sup> March, I attended games or visited the following Clubs this season: Beckenham, Medway, Beccehamians, Aylesford, Park House, Blackheath, Canterbury, Tunbridge Wells, Sevenoaks, Kings College Hospital, Cranbrook. Surrey U 20s vs Kent U 20s at Farnham and Kent U 20s vs Hertfordshire at Cranbrook. Sadly, the season ended for all of us on the 15<sup>th</sup> March as I was privileged to present ties to our U 20s, who had just defeated Hertfordshire to reach the semi-final of the U 20s' County Championship. Other Clubs in East Kent were scheduled to be visited and will be on my list for this season, either to attend games or Club Executive meetings, if you would like me to do so.

I also look forward, as is usual, to meeting a large number of you at the rescheduled Volunteer Awards evening, the Mitsubishi Awards event, and at the County Awards evening at the Ashford International Hotel. In addition, I have already been involved with a number of you at the Zoom cluster sessions during August and will attend others as we schedule more as the restart approaches.

## **3. RFU TASKS AND SUB-COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

- During 19-20, my second year on Council, I was appointed to the RFU Age Grade Governance Sub-Committee and worked during the season on trying to ensure we did not put too much unnecessary pressure on our volunteers at County level. Perhaps the clearest example of this being the important issue of 17 year olds playing up to Senior Rugby. Debbie Park, our excellent Youth Chair, drafted proposals for a simplification of procedure for 2020-21, and I was involved in ensuring that this proposal was seriously looked at before the start of the new season. We await notification of the potential changes to be made, which retain clear player welfare objectives, whilst ensuring the procedures for applying and approval are simpler.
- I have now been a member of the RFU CB and Club Development Sub-Committee for 18 months, during which time we have had to operate with dwindling finances.

Our recent work has involved funding streams during the pandemic (see comments in item 1 of this report), education of volunteers through increasing the number of webinars and online materials, the future of the Leadership Academy, which Kent supports strongly, the development of Clubs as Community hubs, the development of Commercial skills amongst volunteers and the ability in a difficult economic environment to find sponsors, the potential moving forward to look at the adoption of Club Minimum standards at higher league levels and the administration and provision of Community game funding streams to cope with the suspension of the game.

- I have been a Member of the Council Services Working Group, representing the Council to ensure that it is properly consulted on a range of activities which affect their roles and work.
- I was also appointed to a time-related working group on the Powers of the RFU Council to hold the Management Board to account in regard to its Annual work

programme. This has involved new proposals on communication, policy making, consultation procedures, access to documents and their storage. All of these issues then providing the Council with information, which means it is equipped at all stages to make informed decisions that affect the future of the game.

#### **4. APPOINTMENTS FOR 2020-21**

For the coming season, I have been appointed by the RFU Nominations Committee to chair the CB and Club Development sub-group, and as a result, I have also been appointed to the Community Game Board of the RFU. As such, I'm in a very good position moving forward to represent the County and the National game across the total range of club issues. Restarting the club game in 20-21, financing of the Community game after the losses created by Covid over the next 3 years, discovering and training good quality volunteers for the clubs, the continuation and improvement in CB Leadership Academies, the creation of Community Club hubs, the vital issue of retaining and recruiting players to the game, 16-24 transition to adult men's XV-a-side game, the continued building of the Women's and Girls' game, and the widening of the game's recruitment net for players and volunteers from a diverse background to reflect the Communities we operate in as clubs.

I hope this has given you a flavour of my year and the year to come. I am always available to help our clubs, if required, and receive many phone calls and requests to do just that during the year. I look forward to meeting many of you in what will be a very challenging year for all of us - a fact recognised at Twickenham and within the County Executive Committee. In the meantime, thank you for your support and I look forward to representing Kent in the coming year.

**Roger Clarke - RFU Council Member for Kent**