

RFU Liaison / RFU Councillor's Report (Roger Clarke)

The 2022-23 season was a very active one for me as the County's elected Council Member.

As background, there are now 66 voting Members of RFU Council, of which:

- 28 reside with the geographical, i.e., County Constituent Bodies (CBs); and of these,
- 6 have two voting members (Yorkshire, Lancashire, Notts, Lincs and Derby, Surrey, Gloucestershire, and Middlesex).

This position and the numbers on Council need to be addressed. The RFU will shortly introduce a 12–18-month review, in consultation with you the Clubs and the CBs, of the way it operates as a National Governing Body. This should be welcomed in Kent as several of you raised the issue of the bulky structure of the current RFU set-up when you wrote to me on the tackle height law variation.

Year as Councillor: In 2022-23, I served on several RFU Committees and one of its Foundations. I chaired, for a third year, the Club and CB Development Committee, and sat as a Member of the RFU Community Game Board, the Age Grade Governance Committee and served as a Trustee of the Rugby Football Foundation - a body set up as a Trust with the Charity Commission to handle all the funds granted by the RFU to the Community Game. During the year, I also took part in a number of Task and Finish Groups including: Adult Registration (any action deferred until 2024-25); Community Game Travel Funding (which included funding to travel to offshore clubs such as Guernsey Isle of Man and Isle of Wight and other longer journeys on the mainland); and the Club key objectives Survey for 2023-24, to match against the Community Budget key targets for the same year.

As a final point on this part of my work as a Councillor, I will be moving at the start of next season from Club and CB Development, having completed a three-year cycle, to Chair the RFU Game Development Sub-Committee. This move will mean that I will be involved in key areas, such as Coach and Match Official education and development, the monitoring and analysis of Community Game injury patterns through the CRISP (Community Rugby Injury Surveillance Project) survey, Pitch side First Aid provision at Senior level and provision of Coach and Match official training and education in the Women's game, to hit targets of 1,500 accredited Women coaches and 500 Women Match officials by the time that England hosts the Women's World Cup in 2025.

Joint Kent County RFU initiatives with the RFU: As part of my joint role as Chair of the County Executive and RFU Councillor, I have helped to co-ordinate, along with my County colleagues, the following initiatives: I will only list them in this report as it will be up to others to report on them in detail where they have led on the topic, but all have I hope helped to increase the health and sustainability of a range of Kent Clubs.

1. **Project United** Chaired by Trish Sellars. This pilot project funded by RFU Debenture holder donations exists to provide encouragement to Clubs in areas of wide Community diversity to welcome as many of that Community to their clubs and to Rugby Union as possible. Southwark RFC, Greenwich RFC and Old Colfeians RFC have been involved in some innovative work in these areas.
2. **Project Phoenix:** The RFU and County have worked closely to ensure that as many Kent Clubs as possible who are struggling to recruit players and or volunteers have been helped to complete their League or Merit table fixtures as possible. Kevin Cope our Chair of Club Development and Mark Finnis our RFU Club Developer have worked hard on this project providing both financial and resource aid to clubs and developing an innovative reward system with our main sponsors Shepherd and Neame and Giles Hilton to provide a range of incentives to get Merit Table Games played over the second half of the season. This was so successful, particularly in Kent Rural that the RFU featured the initiative nationally as a model of good practice. This help for clubs will now be extended in 2023-24 to provide aid on coaching and mentoring young players through from Age-Grade to the Senior Club and Folkestone and Deal and Betteshanger, amongst others, have been chosen to develop this pilot for further roll out to Clubs.

3. **Project to build a comprehensive Coach Training and Development Programme in Kent and linked to a Club Coach structure:** Jack Bairstow the RFU Coach Co-ordinator for London and the SE and Miles MacKinnon our new Chair of coaching are working together to ensure that Kent is top of the class for coaching standards, education, and a clear structure. They are working on the Coaching programme for 2023-24 currently and on a range of coaching materials to be financially supported by Kent for clubs to ensure our coaching standards lead in England.
4. **Player consultation panel for the Merit Tables:** Several Counties have now created a Player Panel to consult and provide guidance to the Competition Committee on what sort of product should be offered at Merit Table level. Jarrod Lawrence our new Chair of Game Development is working with Josh Bence RFU Competitions Manager for London and the SE to achieve the creation of such a panel in Kent.
5. **Creating a new Women's Centre of Excellence in Kent:** A number of Centres of Coaching and Playing Excellence for the Women's game are being set up nationally and Kent will have one at Dartford Valley RFC. Trish Sellars will be managing this Project on a day-to-day basis and Mark Finnis, as a volunteer, has taken on the role of Project lead. Work on setting up this Centre is well under way; and with 25 club entries for the Women's RFU leagues next season, this development has come to Kent just in time to help us continue to build the Women's Game.

On reflection, this has not been the best of years for the RFU in liaising and helping its Member Clubs to get through a difficult period after COVID, but as evidenced by the above, a great deal of high-quality activity has been initiated or is underway with more to come in 2023-24. However, as previously communicated in our Monthly Bulletin and in many responses to those individuals and some clubs who wrote or phoned me, our efforts at the RFU to communicate on the tackle height initiative fell short of the mark by some way. I have already passed on - as has the RFU - apologies for the way this was handled. As I have also previously said, I voted at Council for an amendment to ensure that the clubs were communicated with and consulted on the data supporting such a move prior to a final vote, but this mustered 14 votes, only and was rejected. It was doubly ironic that the RFU then had to run just such a comprehensive communication exercise in retrospect with many of our clubs meeting physically at Crowborough RFC. At the meeting, Nigel Gillingham, the RFU President and the RFU Medical Director, Dr Simon Kemp amongst others explained the medical and scientific data and the reasons behind the change. I received some 40 e-mails and a number of other phone calls, responding to these representations by making it clear to all that I felt the game has little alternative but to adopt new tackle law variations. However, the manner of communicating it was not fit for purpose. A huge effort is now being put into Match Official training, player coaching materials and club referee training games to help with the adoption of the tackle height moving to below the sternum. World Rugby has also stepped in to recommend change which will also come I believe before the end of the year in the professional game. In addition, all the Six Nations countries are now sequentially adopting the new variation and the introduction will be watched carefully throughout the season.

If tackle height was not the RFU's finest hour, the RFU and the County fared better in introducing the Future Competition Structure introduced this season which worked well in general in its first season. Here in Kent where our clubs voted narrowly to include lower sides in the RFU Leagues mismatches have been in general few and far between and where being flexible and introducing change is concerned John Day's Competition Sub Committee and Tim Fagg as ROC must be congratulated in making changes to the Metropolitan League structure to provide a promotion league after Christmas and a Cup Competition to ensure teams were better matched. This and the incentive Project introduced by the County shows what can be done by dedicated volunteers on behalf of our 55 voting clubs. We and the RFU will keep a continued close watch on the Competition Structure and the data on games played or postponed and the reasons why during 23-24. This is still vital as more lower sides move in the Counties League structure and some Clubs still struggle for player numbers within the Merit League structure. Both the RFU and the CB will continue to help. However, it is important to recognise that all CB members are volunteers, often at club level, and in some cases in RFU roles.