

Text version of article on P3 Touchline May 2015.

The RFU Council meeting of 17th April marked a milestone for rugby in England, with key actions agreed to drive implementation of the Age Grade Competition Review (AGCR) from September 2016.

Since 2011 there has been a wide-ranging and detailed piece of work involving all facets of rugby union at Under 18 and below for male and female players in clubs, schools and colleges. Continuous stakeholder consultations included: representations from all areas of Age Grade Rugby to the original AGCR Task Group; Mini & Youth Blueprint Roadshows in autumn 2013; Shaping the Game and New Rules of Play research programmes and feedback sessions with clubs, schools, colleges and counties.

The Review reveals that while some county, club, school and college programmes put the player at the centre, sometimes the rationale for why and how Age Grade rugby is run has drifted away from what today's young players really want from the game, which can contribute to player dropout from age 16 onwards and potential compromises on player welfare.

Mark Saltmarsh, RFU Head of Education Development says: "Having researched and listened to young players as well as the adults involved in the Age Grade game, the Review found that there were more and more competitions from local to national level, with the focus often overly centred on winning, which contributed to a noticeable deterioration in touchline and on-pitch behaviour. "There were confusing inconsistencies in clubs and school rules and clashes between schools, clubs and representative rugby.

People were also competing for and overplaying the best players, leaving the rest standing on touchlines. Numerous selection systems were resulting in de-selection for the majority. New players also had too much to learn in one go.

"The overwhelming majority of our teachers, coaches and organisers are dedicated and well-intentioned but the Review found that the nature of the competitive opportunity was driving behaviour. As soon as there is something attached to winning a game, the approach to training and playing inevitably changes. This can also have an impact on levels of safe practice."

The AGCR Implementation Action Plan, which also includes a new strategic direction for Under 16 representative rugby, aims to meet the challenge head on. Its foundations are based on the imperative for the game to be "player-centred, development driven and competition-supported", in that order to ensure that the motivations and welfare of all players, no matter their experience or ability, are the cornerstone of the game they play week in week out.

RFU Council approval of specific elements requiring regulatory changes was essential before moving forward. Work will now take place to deliver the Implementation Action Plan and to reformulate Age Grade Rugby regulations. World Cup winner and National Council member, Phil Vickery explains: "Age Grade rugby is about mass participation: getting as many players playing the right sort of game for their age, with their mates and above all having fun.

"Rugby is a competitive sport and a great lesson for life in learning to win and lose. While this should always be the case, we can't let it get in the way of every young player being safe and no matter how good they are, having an equal chance to play and enjoy the game. If we get that right, the cream will rise to the top and competitive spirit will develop naturally.

"With the Rugby World Cup in England kicking off in September, there is no better time to send a clear message that we are going to put the young player first – we need to hand the game to them, so that it's for the kids playing it rather than the adults running or watching it. This is a really exciting prospect."

The plan is designed, based on the key principles, to define a more consistent integrated competitive offer and deliver building blocks to transition to the 15-a-side game. It will support and work with counties, clubs, schools and colleges to make the change, with the ultimate goal to create more game time for more players.

The AGCR Implementation Plan will drive this across clubs, schools and colleges rugby. The plan includes delivery of consistent age bandings and incremental player progressions for all Age Grade Rugby; a nationally consistent playing menu and calendar that increases inclusivity, clarifies player priorities and dovetails club, school, college competitions; an integrated England Rugby Player Development pathway and representative framework and training and Continuous Professional Development for coaches, referees, parents, teachers and others.

There are a number of implications requiring some change for those organising, delivering and playing rugby at Under 18 and below. These include:

Playing Framework

- Mixed contact rugby finishes after U11
- U13 dual age band for girls does not include U11s
- 15 a side rugby starts at U14
- U13 New Rules are implemented nationally in 2016-17
- Lineout introduction is delayed to U14

Competitive Diet and Season

- A nationally-defined consistent menu of national and county competitions per age group
- No formal league rugby before U15
- Competitive festivals before U12, not competitions/ tournaments that find overall winners
- Competitions and representative rugby at all levels (local to CB to national) to be played in specific, nationally-consistent season windows.

Representative Pathway

- Formation of Regional Player Pathway Groups to drive the programme
- Divisional representative level replaced by regional programme matched with the 14 Regional Academies at U16 (from 2015-16)
- No representative rugby before U15
- No district programmes at U16

Between May and September 2015, an information and awareness campaign will share the plan detail to ensure that everyone involved in Age Grade rugby union knows how the game will look from September 2016 onwards. Regular updates on EnglandRugby.com, in Touchline and other game communications, will be key to keeping everyone informed.

A series of resources, events and support programmes will continue through to and beyond the start of the 2016-17 season. The RFU is committed to helping the game to make the changes and to be ready for the big exciting kick-off in 17 months' time. "Young players told us that most important to them is getting on the pitch, playing alongside friends, getting as much opportunity to do so as the rest of their team and enjoying it. Put simply, the new system will put this at the heart of the game from the 2016-17 season" adds Mark Saltmarsh.

"Strong relationships between clubs and schools are vital to grow youth rugby. The mutual benefit to our club of working with the three local secondaries has been huge. The new consistency between clubs and schools will make this even more effective, maximising everyone's chance to play and develop. More players will want to get involved and for longer." Anastasia Long – Graveney School and Old Rutlishians RFC"

"Finding the correct balance between winning rugby and inclusive rugby is a challenge. In light of the Age Grade Review we have reflected on our current practice and find we are, at times, not in line with

what the game and players need. The review action plan defines that balance nationally and will help us realign our programme to ensure we get the emphasis right for every player at all the age groups.” Mark Nasey – Warwick School.”

“When the New Rules of Play first surfaced in Northumberland, I was a vociferous opponent. Within a year I was a complete convert! The rules give every player more chance to play and in an environment based on activity, safety and fun. The whole philosophy across our clubs is changing; coach to coach relationships are much firmer; our player retention numbers have improved enormously and the focus is very much on long-term player development and participation.” Glenn Forster – Percy Park RFC”