



IRFU Youth Council - Club Resource Booklet





Foreword: Meadhbh Lewis – Chairperson IRFU Youth Council

The IRFU Youth Council are pleased to introduce its inaugural Club Resource Booklet. This booklet is a culmination of a couple of years of hard work and dedication by the IRFU Youth Council members.

If you are in a position to improve the rugby experience for young people in rugby clubs, we would ask you to keep in mind how your club can take on board our recommendations.

While the sample size of this project was low, these findings represent the common lived experience of youth players in Ireland. We as a council recognise that a huge amount of work is being done at all levels to meet the needs of our youth players and volunteers. The recommendations made are both short and long-term focused, with many of our findings linking with the IRFU Strategic Plan 2018 – 2023 and Women In Rugby Action Plan 2018-23.

We want this booklet to show clubs how important it is to reach out to their young members and connect with them. Our long-term focus is to train club CWO's to deliver these consultations with their players to allow for a constant improvement of the experience delivered to players. Clubs who do so, will empower our sport to evolve with the changing needs of our society and our young people.

As part of our short-term focus, the Youth Council have turned their attention to developing a number of the areas mentioned through an IRFU Youth Volunteering award in which players will be asked to complete a number of different modules and practical hours across a number of different topics.

The Youth Council have been trained based on guidelines from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and are always contactable for clubs who would like more guidance on consulting with their youth players – youthcouncil@irfu.ie

I would sincerely like to thank each of the club, school and university teams that facilitated these club consultations, it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience to meet club members and carry out these consultations with players.

Foreword: Colin McEntee – IRFU Rugby Development Director

I would like to thank the IRFU Youth Council for all their work over the past three years, leading to the publication of this booklet – it is a valuable resource both for clubs in their daily operations and for the IRFU as a national government body.

Some of the recommendations outlined have already been actioned; some are longer term projects. As an organisation, we know where we are and we know where we need to be.

The solutions are there to create the right environment for our young players. They are in the values we live and the game we play.

This booklet shows us the importance of insight and an authentic voice for young public in the delivery of our strategic plan. I look forward to our continued work with the council in ensuring that the voice of our youth players is heard.

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Background & Aims Of Project

The Youth Council hosted youth consultations with clubs and schools across the four provinces in order to gather their thoughts, concerns and issues in relation to youth rugby. The topics of the consultations were based on issues raised in the 4 Nations Survey and internal reports. These consultations ran from April 2019 – March 2020.

The Youth Council and Spirit Officers were trained, based on the guidelines from Sport Ireland and The Department of Children and Youth Affairs on consulting with youths in order to maximize the impact of these consultations

These consultations provided a safe and inclusive environment where youths could express their opinion without the pressure of being judged by coaches or the fear of repercussions. These consultations also provide a unique and effective way of gaining insights on the opinions of young people without the bias that other methodologies have, which are often used by adult figures.

These consultations encouraged discussion around important topics affecting youth rugby rather than just answers. These responses are the focus of feedback to the IRFU on where youths see improvements in the game to keep them involved in rugby, be that in a playing or volunteering capacity.

Outcome

The Youth Council project along with results from 4 Nations Surveys resulted in the creation of this resource booklet for clubs which contains positive ways to keep youths involved in rugby in a playing and/or volunteering capacity.

The booklet contains 3 common issues or themes that were identified from the research/survey and consultations, as well as solutions to these issues. Recommendations to the IRFU are also made.



With thanks to the following rugby clubs for their participation in the Club Consultations/Youth Council Survey

Munster	Leinster	Ulster	Connacht
Bandon RFC	Arklow RFC	Antrim Grammar School	Ballinasloe RFC
Mitchelstown RFC	De La Salle Palmerston FC	King Scholars RFC	Galwegians RFC
Skibbereen RFC	Dublin City University	Randalsown RFC	
University of Limerick Rugby Club	Gorey RFC		
	Kilkenny College		
	MU Barnhall RFC		
	Navan RFC		
	Old Belvedere RFC		
	Railway Union RFC		
	University College Dublin Rugby Club		
	Westmanstown RFC		
	Wicklow RFC		

- 15 of the 21 consultation were held face-to-face
- 6 of these consultations were done via SurveyMonkey
- Players and respondents reached represented all playing levels i.e. new players to provincial and international players as well as volunteers
- Over 300 hundred respondents
- 55% male, 45% females responses



IRFU Youth Council Members



Meadhbh Lewis – Chairperson



Sarah Darker – Vice Chairperson



Eve Higgins



Matthew O'Driscoll



Jack Hampton



Conor Rochford



Structure of Each Club Consultation

STICKY NOTES – Anonymous Opinion

- What could the IRFU do better in youth rugby?
- Do you see yourself remaining involved in rugby & why?
- Do you see yourself dropping out of rugby & why

WALKING DEBATE – Statements which spark conversation

- Start with light hearted statements
- There is a pressure on me to perform
- I am getting a fair opportunity to play rugby
- The standard of refereeing is good enough at my level
- My club respects all levels of all age groups and gender
- My club provides sufficient medical needs
- My club has good enough training facilities
- More information about the different formats of the game is something that is needed
- Increased availability of refereeing/coaching courses is something that would increase my willingness to stay involved in rugby
- There is a good link between my school and clubs/university's to allow me to continue playing after I finish school
- There is a good link between the junior and senior teams in my club
- Playing socially is more important to me than playing at a high level
- I play enough rugby
- I find it hard to balance rugby with my education – no time

PICTURE – Anonymous Opinion

- What you like/dislike/want for the future in rugby



PART I

Results

SPIRIT OF RUGBY

RESPECT	INTEGRITY	INCLUSIVITY	FUN	EXCELLENCE
For all those involved in the rugby family, the wider community and self. Gratitude to coaches, officials, volunteers and other leaders in the game. Discipline while playing the game. Respect for the physicality of the game and commitment to the safety of the player as paramount.	Actions on and off the pitch that are open and transparent. We aspire to always have the best interests of the player and those involved in the game, especially youth players, at heart. In rugby we aspire to do the right thing and endeavour not to be bystanders.	Diversity of opinion and culture means working together to be a vibrant, respectful organisation. Rugby is a sport of choice for all, it transcends barriers and differences of race, gender, religion and sexual orientation. Players that have a positive life-long experience of the game can remain within the Irish Rugby family throughout their lives, fulfilling roles that enable them to be the best version of themselves.	A passion for the game, on and off the pitch, rugby is a source of joy for all. Everyone has an equal right to learn, play and administer the game and should be respected for the age and stage of development that they are at; especially youth players.	Strive to be the best that we can be. There may be others who play better, make better decisions and perform under pressure better, but we complete each task knowing that we could not have done more for ourselves, our team, club or school; we are comfortable in the knowledge that we are doing our best.



Results have been broken into three main themes, each of which were touched upon in each consultation. A concise summary of each theme is described. Recommendations to aid in improving these areas are also provided. Findings on women's and girls' rugby as well as recommendations to improve playing numbers and retaining more women in rugby are provided in a separate section.





Main Themes

1. **Resources** – Ensuring that club resources including dressing rooms, pitches and access to gym facilities is shared equally among club members was a consistent theme in each consultation. Players alluded to the fact that having fair access to resources boosted morale among players and created a united feeling between their team and other teams in the club. The relegation of younger and women's teams to back pitches had the opposite effect with players feeling that their contribution to the club was not recognised
2. **Coaching Courses** – It was put to players whether completing coaching and refereeing courses would increase their likelihood to stay involved in rugby. The majority said that attending coaching courses would allow them to stay involved in the game. Appetite for becoming a referee was there but not as emphatic. Players also explained how strength and conditioning is becoming a large part of the game. They wanted to see more information on this side of the game and suggested having a number of people in the club attend S&C courses would aid their development as rugby players. Currently, they felt that they are attending the gym not knowing what exercises are beneficial as well as picking up incorrect form which increases the risk of injury. Courses to aid players in understanding the laws of the game were also suggested
3. **Promotion** - It was noted by both male and female players that women's teams were not treated in the same spotlight as men's teams. Younger teams also described their feeling of pride when the club recognised their achievements online but felt that it was not done enough



PART II

Club Recommendations



The green writing throughout the remainder of the document represents where these findings link with both the IRFU Strategic Plan and the IRFU Women in Rugby Action plan that are currently in place.



1. Resources – *'Place' IRFU Strategic Plan (SP) page 26*

- Fair pitch delegation – rotating access to main pitch for all ages where possible and not just seniors
- Fair allocation of changing rooms and equipment
- In the case of two senior games being played, it may be beneficial to alternate who gets the main pitch
- Try to use the clubhouse as the "hub" of the community. This encourages club members at all levels to get to know one another after games or while watching rugby
- Providing gym access and time slots to male and female players 16 and over, where possible
- Avail of IRFU wallet cards (Concussion/Return To Play/Welcoming Clubs) so club volunteers and members have easy access to IRFU resources and information
- Clubs should ensure the funding for teams at similar levels is as equal as possible – for example, where funding is made available for food after a men's match, the same should be done for women's matches
- Enlist the help of youth players in the running of the club. This allows for continuity in the club and also makes it easier for players to stay involved at a volunteering role if they decide to stop playing rugby. For example: helping coach at mini's level, aid in the promotion of youth teams by writing match reports for the club website, running touch judge for youth games, aid in the maintenance of the club



Case Study – Wicklow RFC

During the consultation of the players of Wicklow RFC, both male and female respondents noted a strong link between the underage teams and the adult teams in the club. When asked about this link, respondents noted a strong sense of community in the club. The Youth Rugby element of the club do support and attend senior team matches, and both male and female senior players would often help with training sessions and coaching throughout the season. As a whole, both male and female players said they felt supported and that progression from age-grade rugby to adult rugby is something that would interest them.

In particular, it was noted by male U18 players moving into senior, that the club arranged a joint preseason with the men's senior squad. This initiative included on pitch non-contact skills and fitness sessions and gym work. Players expressed satisfaction at the club giving them exposure to the type of coaching and training they would take part in, as well as the competitiveness and overall workload involved. When asked about making the jump to adult rugby with the club in the following year, this was seen as a big positive from the group - who as a collective felt that this increased their likelihood of making that jump next season.





2. Coaching Courses – *IRFU SP Headline Targets Page 24*

- Clubs should try to put players and volunteers forward for as many courses as possible - this includes coaching, refereeing, nutrition and medical
- These courses should be to allow members to improve either their game or help them to stay involved in the club
- S&C coaches - Enlist the help of members who have a background in this area and can guide players with training plans
- Players felt that attending officiating and coaching courses would aid in their development as rugby players and improve their knowledge of games - onus on clubs to inform members of upcoming courses that members can attend.
- Players identified that they would be more likely to stay involved in rugby in a volunteering capacity if they have completed coaching courses
- Sharing of knowledge between club coaches to provide better quality training sessions for players – **IRFU SP PAGE 27 – PEOPLE point 1**
- Alter pitch size depending on the number of players to teach players how to identify and utilise space
- Run positional clinics for players on occasions to improve their understanding of their playing position
- It is important that coaches are constantly improving and developing, players identified “having a good quality coach” as something that would improve their overall rugby experience – **IRFU SP PAGE 27 – PEOPLE point 4**



What can coaches do to keep players involved?

- Know and understand the laws of the game
- Maintain the 'fun' element of rugby and ensure players are enjoying themselves
- Winning games should not be your main and only focus
- Ensure every player is getting a fair and equal amount of playing time
- Don't be afraid to ask the players what they want
- Do not put pressure on players to play well, let them play!
- Ensure training sessions are innovative and don't become mundane
- Respect the officials and their decisions, they are doing their best
- Promote positive touchline behaviour
- Incorporate bodyweight and fitness training into training sessions. Players said that while they don't like doing it, it benefits them hugely



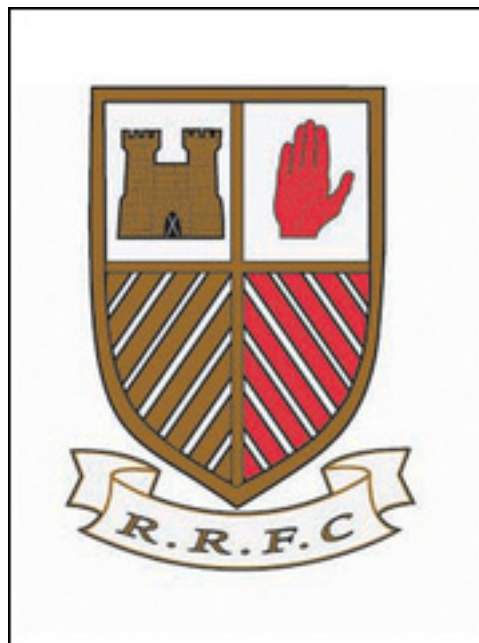


Case Study – Randalstown RFC/Antrim Grammar School

Positive Club-School Link Practice

As of the 2019-2020 season, Antrim Grammar School appointed Randalstown 1st XV player as their director of rugby. Antrim Grammar School is at the low end of the competitive spectrum in Ulster Schools Rugby and participate in tier 4 of the new structure of the Schools Cup (Ulster's SSC competition).

Due to this, there can be less scope for these school players to get consistent game time all season round. The director of rugby linked up with Randalstown RFC's CCRO and encouraged players who did not get regular game time to train with the Randalstown U16 and U18 squads with the view to playing in friendlies for RRFC outside their league matchdays. This proved relatively successful with players getting more game time while also establishing links for these players at a club for when they leave school.





3. Promotion – *IRFU SP Page 35 – Leading the way in digital communication*

- Each club should have a designated Public Relations Officer who is responsible for the promotion of their club via social media and other outlets such as local newspapers
- Each club should be active on social media channels including Instagram, Twitter and Facebook
- It is highly important to ensure that all teams are being promoted regardless of what level they play at
- Match reports – produce a feature on each team every couple of months depending on the number of teams in the club. Enlist the help of youth players to aid in this task
- Spotlight feature – a nice idea would be to focus on a youth team each week, including updates on upcoming fixtures or past results, the number of players involved in the team and how new players are always welcome
- *Photography of games on occasion where possible
- Publish weekend fixtures on social media early in the week for all teams
- Live-tweeting and match updates on Instagram etc. (of any major match, not just seniors)
- Club newsletters – featuring results and congratulatory messages that can be posted on the website and social media channels. This can be done at the start, middle and end of the season to update followers
- Team profiles are a nice idea for younger teams to feature on social media channels
- Information nights in clubs at the start of the season for parents – this may be worthwhile to attract new members. Information on the positive of rugby and the training times for each age group throughout the season

*Please see <https://www.irishrugby.ie/playing-the-game/spirit-of-rugby/safeguarding/> for further information



PART III

Women's Rugby





- More promotion of women's teams both underage and senior is needed by clubs, provinces and the IRFU
- *Uncontested scrums and lineouts in U16s when contested in U18s provincial – look at this to ensure girls are properly equipped to contest both these areas
- It was noted that girls disliked the use of misogynistic names (Mullingar Heifers, Barnhall Babes)
- Women's players felt that they rarely got the same access as equivalent men's team to pitches, changing rooms and gyms
- Pathways to playing at a higher level need to be clearer - underage players knowing where to play to reach provincial and national levels – **Women in Rugby Action Plan (WIR AP) PAGE 11 – Participation point 2**
- Loss of interest among girls due to lack of advertising, support and broadcasting for women's rugby - **WIR AP PAGE 21 – engagement**
- A greater presence of International and Provincial women's players at developing clubs/schools would spark interest among players considering to take up the sport - **WIR AP PAGE 21 – engagement point 6**
- Players don't know the Laws – clubs can direct players toward World Rugby website which contains the laws of the game <https://laws.worldrugby.org/>
- Players noted how they would like to see more female coaches/referees in a rugby environment – **IRFU SP Page 32 – Headline Targets // WIR AP PAGE 13- People point 4, 5 & 6.**
- Introduction to contact is mostly in U12/U14, girls emphasised their desire for it to be introduced at an earlier age

*Trials have taken place in Leinster looking to rectify this issue. Results from these trials are being compiled.



Recommendations – Women's Rugby

- Promoting rugby at secondary school level – the introduction of competitions for participating schools at this level to encourage more girls into the game – **WIR AP Page 10 – Participation – point 2**
- Better promotion of XV's game – players felt that there is a larger emphasis on the 7s game in women's rugby and felt that this should be balanced with more content on the XV's game – **WIR AP PAGE 21 - engagement**
- Developing teams/players that need more game time – there may be scope for barbarian style competitions to be run by provinces/clubs in the same area
- Jump from U18s to Senior women's too large highlighting a need for the implementation of an U20s competition
- Players felt that there is a need for positive or 'feel good' videos on women's/girls rugby would help the recruitment of new players and aid in changing the stigma around women in rugby - **WIR AP PAGE 21 – engagement point 7**

Club Finder

Munster

<https://www.munsterrugby.ie/domestic/rugby/women/youth-clubs/>

<https://www.munsterrugby.ie/domestic/rugby/women/adult-clubs/>

Ulster

<https://www.ulsterrugby.com/rugby-in-ulster/rugby-development/women-and-girls/club-finder/>

Connacht

<https://www.connachtrugby.ie/community/club-finder/>



PART IV

Recommendations to the IRFU



Considerations for Youth Development and Retention



1. U20s – '*Playing the Game*' IRFU SP Page 26

- Jump from U18s to Senior is too large for some players and negatively impacts players involvement in rugby. This was a common point of discussion at each consultation. Players felt that an U20s league should be implemented for both male and females. They found that jumping straight from U18s to senior rugby was too big a jump physically and mentally for players. Players discussed how their fear of injury increased as they transitioned from underage rugby to senior rugby
- It remains to be seen whether the playing numbers are there for a club U20s league in the women's game. It would be worthwhile establishing provincial U20s sides which feed into a national U20s team before establishing a national U20s league. There may be scope for an U20s league in third level rugby competitions where playing numbers are high – **WIR AP PAGE 11 – Participation – point 3**
- It was suggested that U18.5 should be abolished. Only allow for an U18s and U20s - team numbers are stretched at this age level. Make the age-grades the same across each province for convenience



2. Refereeing

- Most of our respondents expressed frustration about referees not being aware of the variations of the game at different levels. This was particularly noted by women's players who felt that many referees were unaware of the differences
- Some women's players noted that referees can sometimes make condescending comments to the women's players e.g. "That's not very ladylike". These comments drained the enjoyment from the game and lead to frustrations among players
- Some felt there were biased referees depending on what club you were playing against e.g. the same ref would be at the same club every time - Home teams getting the referee raises questions
- Referees not held to a standard – it was felt that most are inexperienced and have influenced results of games. It was noted how they felt that referees are not aided in their development and continuously make the same errors
- Younger players emphasised their desire to be refereed at a higher level to enforce the rules of the game at a younger age
- Lack of affiliated linesmen was highlighted as an issue
- Clubs should nominate one-two members to be the affiliated club referee/touch judge, this should be made mandatory

3. Strength and Conditioning

- Consultations highlighted the need for more information around the area of strength and conditioning for players of all ages
- This could involve clips from the IRFU athletic development team on important aspects of development for players
- A basic S&C course could be developed for club volunteers which can take place provincially before the beginning of the season



4. Other Considerations

- Men's promotion concerning international matches/players greatly outweighed the promotion to the women's games. Players felt that this needed to improve, to ensure that the women's game is getting increased recognition – **IRFU SP PAGE // WIR AP PAGE 21 – engagement**
- Possible scope for the introduction of social media training for club volunteers – **IRFU SP PAGE 27 – PEOPLE point 1&3**
- More clarity is needed on the IRFU transfer systems currently in place
- Scope for a map or toolkit describing playing options that are available to players after they finish school
 - <https://www.ulsterrugby.com/rugby-in-ulster/rugby-development/clubs/club-finder/>
 - <https://www.munsterrugby.ie/domestic/clubs/senior-club-contacts/>
 - <https://www.leinsterrugby.ie/domestic-rugby/club-finder/>
 - <https://www.connachtrugby.ie/community/club-finder/>
- Players also felt that there was a lack of opportunity for boys to make provincial teams after U16. Boys that develop later are not given another opportunity. They felt there to be a need for scouts to assess players at an older age – **IRFU SP PAGE 12 - TALENT**

WHAT THE PLAYERS SAID

REMAINING IN RUGBY...?

"Yes, it's the only passion I have ever had"

"No because I feel like the coaching isn't good enough in my club"



"Rugby has a great community spirit, I love the sport and its a great way to make friends and to stay fit"



"Make an u20s team for male and female rugby as it's a big jump from u18 to senior"



EDUCATION

"More information on strength and conditioning as well as the laws of the game"



"Rugby is the most inclusive and diverse sport I've played and I'm passionate about it"

FAIRNESS...

"As much gender equality as possible, more female representation at lower levels in terms of coaches and referees"



"It's so much fun it's like one big family, doesn't matter how unfit, big, small or tall you are everyone is seen as the same"



PROMOTION

"More promotion for women's and youth teams at a club level as well as by the IRFU"



PART V

Checklist - In conjunction with the IRFU for a safe and fun game

See [Irish Rugby](#) for further information

Before the activities for the season start here are some points to consider:

Volunteers:

- Has your club carried out a risk assessment and produced a [Child Safeguarding Statement](#)?
- Has your club provided appropriated training to age-grade coaches, volunteers and affiliate referees?
- Does your club have a designated Club Welfare Officer?
- Does your club hold [consultations with your players](#)?
- Does your club have a designated youth co-ordinator and mini rugby representative?
- Does your club adequately monitor training sessions and matches to ensure it meets with the needs of youth and mini players?
- Does your club make provision for including youth players in club volunteering roles? e.g. PRO, coaching aid, officiating etc.
- Is your club constantly upskilling to meet the needs of its players?
- Does your club provide activities and events that keep the players interested? E.g. S&C, social occasions etc.
- Does your club promote the core values of the game – Respect, Integrity, Inclusivity, Fun and Excellence?



Coaches:

- Are your training sessions fun and inclusive?
- Are you fully educated on the laws of the game?
- Does your club respect all levels of all age groups and gender?
- Have you signed your Declaration of Intent?
- Do you promote positive side-line behaviour?

Players:

- Do I know what [resources](#) are available to me?
- Am I getting a fair and equal opportunity to play rugby?
- Do I have the right attitude toward training and playing as well as for club volunteers and teammates?
- Am I registered and have I paid my membership fees?

Limitations of this project

- These consultations **only** represent 10% of the youth teams in Ireland
- Difficulty organising consultations due to a lack of uptake from clubs
- The sample size was relatively small in some clubs
- Lack of equal distribution of consultations in each province due to the make-up of the Youth Council, most are based in Leinster
- Consultations via SurveyMonkey did not allow for the same discussion around topics as a face-to-face consultations



Acknowledgements

Thank you to past members Conor Fitzpatrick, Billy O'Hora, Zoe Cheshire and Daniel Mikolajczyk for their contributions to this project along with the Spirit of Rugby Officers for facilitating and aiding with club consultations. Finally, thank you to Anne Marie Hughes for developing the IRFU Youth Council into a working committee and for her continued support and guidance throughout the duration of the project.

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