



ADULT MALE FUTURE COMPETITIONS PLAN



England
Rugby

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INTRODUCTION

This plan recognises the significant opportunity for rugby to develop an optimal playing offer and structure that protects the future health of the Game for adult men. It aims to meet the needs of current and future players, balancing quality of experience and player welfare needs with less travel, whilst at the same time protecting the sustainability of clubs.

It sets out a series of proposals for the adult male competition structure of the English Club Championship from Level 3 (National One) downwards based on the work of the Future Competitions Structure (FCS) group, which is a task group of the RFU Community Game Board. This work follows on from collection of extensive evidence and

engagement with the Game over a number of months, which has provided critical insight into the challenges identified.

Over the last ten years, whilst rugby union generally continues to buck the downward participation trend seen in some other team sports, there is an accepted view from all available evidence that it is the female and age grade sectors of the Game that are supporting this. In the male game whilst the playing pool continues to grow, players are playing less often, and have different wants and needs, which is set against relatively little change in the way competitive rugby is delivered. Generally more players are required to fulfil a 1st XV league season, which can

have a corresponding negative effect on Lower XVs and the club.

Whilst it is recognised that different levels of the community game and regions have different challenges and opportunities, the general question as to whether the competitive structure we have is the best one to ensure the future health of the Game, has raised its head in Club and Constituent Body forums throughout the last few years.

Whilst being mindful of the current challenges that may come with COVID-19, this plan recommends that now is the right time for change and to put these proposals to the Game in this document for further feedback and for implementation in season 2021/22.





PRINCIPLES AND RATIONALE FOR CHANGE

Any changes to the adult male game should meet the following four principles. The principles are equally important and are not intended to have priority over each other:

- Player centricity/player welfare
- Appropriate travel time/distance
- Quality of player experience/quality of competition
- Club sustainability

WHY CHANGE IS NEEDED?

Data over the past 3 seasons has shown that players are choosing to play approximately 15 league games on average per season. However, the majority of leagues require teams to play far in excess of this number. Among other issues this leads to:

- Player burn-out – the season becomes a ‘slog’ of hard league matches
- Season on season, players are playing less games, for different reasons but largely through lifestyle choice, thus;
- Season on season, more players are needed to complete a 1st XV season (43 is the national average), thus;
- As more players are needed to complete a 1st XV season, pressure is placed on club lower XV's leading to increased walkovers

Alongside this recent studies have shown the appetite in the game for meaningful cup and knockout rugby is strong (over 90% of FCS survey respondents at any level and region still desired a cup offer). A significant proportion would like to consider a change to the current offer either in timing or placement in season, or in ‘excitement’ in how it is delivered/the format, and this was largely also borne out on recent club webinars.

WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS FOR CHANGE?

Through balancing the four key principles, the playing data and feedback from the various touch points we have had with the Game over the last few months, the following factors will be important in the proposed changes:

- Creating space in the fixture schedule for appropriate specific breaks from league rugby, this has had unanimous positive feedback from players, coaches and clubs.
- Delivering a sufficient number of guaranteed fixtures (league and knockout) which can help towards club sustainability.

This will be achieved by:

- a. Restructuring leagues in most cases by reducing the amount of fixtures required to complete the season, flattening the pyramid through more leagues at certain levels, and therefore reducing travel time to/from matches.
 - b. Offering excitement to all stakeholders involved in the club game (but particularly players) through ensuring league games right up to the end of the season are meaningful for all teams and not just those challenging for the league title or fighting relegation, via introduction of a revamped knockout offer at levels 5 & 6, levels 7 and below.
- Considering increased stability within the leagues by reducing the ‘churn’ of promotion and relegation, and the damaging impact it can have on a club’s short term and long-term sustainability.
 - ‘Regionalisation’ to reduce travel which involves all teams at a given level being grouped geographically, potentially disregarding current CB and divisional (DOC) boundaries in an effort to minimise travel across the country (and to keep this refreshed annually to continually minimise travel and ensure appropriate competition).
 - Introduction of more teams in the pyramid to support more consistent local competition and club sustainability. This is achieved by allowing Lower XV's entry to the RFU leagues beyond the current scope of regulations and raising the ceiling from Level 8 to Level 7 (which will provide consistency across the country as well as supporting regionalisation and the principle of minimising travel time). The criteria and application process will be carefully reviewed to ensure any concerns over future regulations are addressed.
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SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

At all levels:

- Dedicated 'break' weeks (from league rugby) within the fixture schedule.
- Two week break (from league rugby) at Christmas.
- More regular reviews of the competitions structure every 3 years or so (to be determined) in order to better react to feedback and performance of current structure and to initiate change.

LEAGUES

The table below summarises proposed changes to the competition structure at each level.

LEVEL	NUMBER OF LEAGUES	LEAGUE SIZE	CUP COMPETITIONS
3	1	14 (DOWN FROM 16)	NO
4	3 (UP FROM 2)	14 (DOWN FROM 16)	NO
5	6 (UP FROM 4)	12 (DOWN FROM 14)	TO BE INTRODUCED*
6	12 (UP FROM 8)	12 (DOWN FROM 14)	TO BE INTRODUCED*
7 & BELOW	MINIMUM 16**	10-12***	YES

*All cups to take place post-season with mid-season entry

** Dependent on new entries

*** League size flexible depending on effect of regionalisation and local need

Promotion and relegation from the league would still be based on finishing league position.

NATIONAL CHAMPIONS CUP AND CUP COMPETITIONS

The below table shows the proposed cup structures at each level

LEVEL	TIERS	FORMAT
5	4	Tiers based on finishing positioning - 4 pools into knockouts E.g. Top in each division into National Champions Cup, middle tier into Plate. Pool winners will then move onto Semi-Final and Final knockouts to crown a winner at each tier, with the Top Tier winner being crowned National Champion.
6	2	Top tier National Champions Cup - 16 team - 4 pools into knockout. As Level 5 cup competitions above with winner crowned as National Champion 2nd tier - 2 x 64-team waterfall knockout competitions split North/South. Teams will be drawn locally into a knockout competition. The winners of the 1st round will progress in that competition. 1st round losers will drop into another competition. All competitions (2 in North & 2 in South) will then continue in a knockout format through to a final.
7+		TBC based on confirmed league structure - however will follow similar format to above

FEATURES OF PROPOSED CUP COMPETITIONS

- Delivered after league season – all cups will take place after the league season has been completed. This removes the burden and clash between league and cup games being integrated into the fixture schedule. Furthermore, a team's finishing league position will qualify them into the relevant tier of competition at the level they are playing at i.e. teams finishing 1st to 3rd will compete against teams finishing in the same positions from leagues across the country at same level, ensuring meaningful matches. This principle in the cup competitions is a key element of increased participation and competitiveness
- Mid-season entry – entry into the cup (at all levels) will be optional and the deadline for teams submitting their entry will be mid-season (Jan/Feb). This will help support teams and players to decide what is right for them at the right time e.g. to support teams that want and need more competitive matches in season to enter cup, or to allow for a team to focus on league promotion or rest breaks and thus not to enter cup.
- Pool competitions – teams will be grouped into pools, thus guaranteeing additional fixtures potentially at home (minimum of 3 and maximum of 6). The winners of each pool will then progress into the knockout rounds.
- Waterfall competitions – teams will be drawn against one another in straight knockout matches. Teams losing in the 1st round will drop down into a Plate competition while 1st round winners continue on. This will guarantee at least 2 additional games for entrants.

Cup competitions would be designed to culminate in a National Community Game finals Day to crown the National Champions at different levels of the game. This will provide the opportunity to celebrate community rugby and still allow for representative rugby to have a place at end season.



STRUCTURED SEASON	LEVEL 3/4 14 TEAMS	LEVEL 5/6 12 TEAMS	LEVEL 7 & BELOW 12 TEAMS	LEVEL 7 & BELOW 10 TEAMS
	26 LEAGUE GAMES (NO CUP)	22 LEAGUE GAMES POST-LEAGUE CUP	22 LEAGUE GAMES POST-LEAGUE CUP	18 LEAGUE GAMES POST-LEAGUE CUP
SATURDAY	SATURDAY	SATURDAY	SATURDAY	SATURDAY
05/09/2020	LGE 1	LGE 1	LGE 1	
12/09/2020	LGE 2	LGE 2	LGE 2	LGE 1
19/09/2020	LGE 3	LGE 3	LGE 3	LGE 2
26/09/2020	LGE 4	LGE 4	LGE 4	LGE 3
03/10/2020	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK	BREAK
10/10/2020	LGE 5	LGE 5	LGE 5	LGE 4
17/10/2020	LGE 6	LGE 6	LGE 6	LGE 5
24/10/2020	LGE 7	LGE 7	LGE 7	LGE 6
31/10/2020	LGE 8	LGE 8	LGE 8	LGE 7
07/11/2020	BREAK	RESERVE	RESERVE	BREAK
14/11/2020	LGE 9	LGE 9	LGE 9	LGE 8
21/11/2020	LGE 10	LGE 10	LGE 10	LGE 9
28/11/2020	LGE 11	LGE 11	LGE 11	LGE 10
05/12/2020	LGE 12	LGE 12	LGE 12	BREAK
12/12/2020	LGE 13	LGE 13	LGE 13	LGE 11
19/12/2020	LGE 14	LGE 14	LGE 14	LGE 12
26/12/2020	CHRISTMAS BREAK			
02/01/2021				
09/01/2021	LGE 15	LGE 15	LGE 15	RESERVE
16/01/2021	LGE 16	LGE 16	LGE 16	LGE 13
23/01/2021	LGE 17	LGE 17	LGE 17	LGE 14
30/01/2021	LGE 18	LGE 18	LGE 18	LGE 15
06/02/2021	BREAK	RESERVE	RESERVE	BREAK
13/02/2021	LGE 19	LGE 19	LGE 19	LGE 16
20/02/2021	LGE 20	LGE 20	LGE 20	LGE 17
27/02/2021	RESERVE	LGE 21	LGE 21	RESERVE
06/03/2021	LGE 21	LGE 22	LGE 22	LGE 18
13/03/2021	RESERVE	RESERVE	RESERVE	
20/03/2021	LGE 22	CUP	CUP	CUP
27/03/2021	LGE 23			
03/04/2021	RESERVE			
10/04/2021	LGE 24			
17/04/2021	LGE 25			
24/04/2021	LGE 26			
01/05/2021	PLAYOFF*	COUNTY		
08/05/2021				
15/05/2021				
22/05/2021				
29/05/2021				
05/06/2021				

* Only if required

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The proposals in this plan have been designed with a view to best balancing the 4 key principles below, as well as reflecting all the available evidence and feedback:

- Player centricity/player welfare
- Appropriate travel time/distance
- Quality of player experience/quality of competition
- Club sustainability

The new structure will:

- Reduce travel through variously 'flattening the pyramid' and reducing league sizes, without significantly reducing quality of league rugby
- Retain the principle of automatic promotion from regular season programme
- Reduce churn in leagues and increase stability through amended relegation
- Establish break weekends during regular season to assist player welfare and availability
- Remove conflict of League and Cup competitions during regular season
- Provide additional home match options through National Champions Cup competitions post regular season
- Guarantee a minimum match season with National Champions Cup option for those teams entering
- Conclude season on first weekend in May to avoid clash with Representative Rugby
- Provide a commercial and revenue driving alternative with high profile dynamic end to the season with National Champions and Cup winners at each level
- Provide a mix of competitions that players/coaches/clubs requested in surveys and consultation

We really want to hear your feedback on these plans, whether you support them, or have other thoughts and ideas. Please submit any feedback direct via the following [link https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/8KCJ3N6](https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/8KCJ3N6)

Please click on the following link to view:

- **FCS Group Terms of Reference and Membership**
- **FAQ's**
- **Data and Insights Pack**

<https://www.englandrugby.com/news/article/recommendations-for-adult-male-competition-structure-published>

