

Council Representative Report

Buckinghamshire RFU AGM July 23

Since the last Bucks AGM in 2022, I have attended 8 Council meetings, 15 'informal' Council meetings (held virtually), 10 Community Game Board (CGB) meetings and chaired 5 Rugby Growth Sub Committee meetings with additional sub group meetings. I attended 10 meetings as a member of the Adult Player Registration Working Group and 6 other Council related meetings including the Nominations Committee. In addition, I attended 16 meetings of the Lessons Learned Working Group looking into the process leading up to the tackle height debacle. These included interviews I conducted with the RFU President, Chair, CEO, Legal Director, Rugby Development Director, and Chairs of Governance, CGB and Laws Committee. I also met with the Chair, CEO and Rugby Development Director informally to discuss community rugby matters.

I have met with the Council Nominations Committee on 3 occasions and continue to work on their behalf on a leadership training and development programme for Council Members.

I have reported to member clubs on my voting record and provided a brief commentary as to why I voted as I did. I remain available to all clubs to further discuss any of these issues.

The following issues are worthy of note in my report:

Gender Participation Policy – July 2022

As noted at the time, I spoke and voted in favour of the policy change until such time as new further peer-reviewed science is available that would prompt a further review at Council. It was important to take precautionary approach to ensure fair competition and the safety of all competitors. Council approved a policy change to only permit players in the female category if the sex originally recorded at birth is female. I responded to requests for discussion with female players within Buckinghamshire to explain and provide comfort that the decision must return to Council should further research be forthcoming that challenges the policy. The broader issue of trans female participation in sport remains prominent on the sporting landscape, with several NGBs of sport now setting their policy in line with that of the RFU.

Lowering the Tackle Height – Domestic Law Variation – January 2023

Much has been written on this issue, and it was probably the most divisive piece of work that Council has handled for many years. I informed clubs that I voted in principle for the tackle height to be lowered and held a further club chairs meeting prior to the vote in April to agree the Domestic Law Variation (DLV) for 2023/24. In February I was accepted onto the working group created to report to Council in July on the process by which the decision was made and what lessons could be learnt. I have taken a leading role conducting interviews and am writing the conclusions for the final report.

Adult Player Registration

This piece of work is important for the RFU in its efforts to understand when, where, and how often people play. However, it also has relevance for clubs and players and as such I wanted to ensure that it is both easy to use and useful for the clubs as well as the RFU. Initially designed to land in 2023/24 with the tackle height and pitch side care requirements, it became obvious that a more realistic start date of 2024/5 was more appropriate so that it would dovetail with the more widespread introduction of the Electronic Match Card (EMC) in that year that will enhance the process of data collection in line with player registration.

At the Council meeting on 16th June, Council ratified my position as Chair the Rugby Growth Sub Committee and my continuing on the Community Game Board. With strategic work on the 'Community Game Future' very much to the fore this year I am pleased to remain at the heart of the decision-making process for the community game. It keeps Bucks RFU and its clubs in a stronger position to offer a perspective on matters that affect them and to promote our work, such as the outputs of the Clubs Conference we held in March.

The main on-going issues for the 2023-24 season are:

- i. Introduction of the Tackle Height DLV: a significant amount of material has been produced for the game and further on-line and face to face activity is planned through July and August. Tackle Champions have been identified to provide more local support. There will be close monitoring of the Community Rugby Injury Surveillance and Prevention Project (CRISPP) and number of yellow / red cards especially in the first 3 – 6 months.
- ii. Future Competitions Structure: a further review will be undertaken to augment this year's high-level review which has identified an acceptance of improvements albeit issues with the Papa John's Cup. Fixtures have now been published for season 23/24, and I'm pleased that no Bucks club has been caught in 'trickle down' relegations. The monitoring of matches played – especially at lower XV levels – will be maintained. It is vitally important that clubs note all 'friendly matches' onto GMS. Buckinghamshire clubs are distributed in leagues as below:
Regional 2 Thames: Amersham & Chiltern, Aylesbury, Marlow
Regional 2 Mid East: Olney
Counties 1 Southern North: Beaconsfield, Bletchley, Buckingham, Milton Keynes
Counties 2 – North: Chesham, High Wycombe
Counties 2 South: Slough
Counties 3 North: Risborough
Counties 3 South: Drifter, Farnham Royal, Phoenix
- iii. The health of the male XVs game: while matches completed in RFU leagues increased last season there is still significant concern at CGB that Merit Table match completions remain lower than hoped at 66%. That said, friendly fixtures have increased and may be offsetting the MT results. This remains a priority within the Rugby Development Business Plan for 23-24 with additional action to target the movement of young players into the adult game.
- iv. Professional Game Partnership: this work will be completed in July 2024. Both the RFU and PRL have a vested interest in changing the parameters of the previous agreement which was heavily weighted in favour of PRL in the early years of the agreement. DCMS now has 2 advisers working alongside the RFU & PRL teams to support the process and report back; this as a result of the loss of Worcester and Wasps and the loan book of £100m that clubs currently hold. The academy structure is also part of the negotiation, and so DPP will also be subject to review. The RFU currently has control of the Worcester and Wasps Academies.

Simon Winman
Bucks RFU Council Representative