

# RFU MEN'S LEAGUES PRE-SEASON BRIEFING 2025-26

# 1. INTRODUCTION

This document has been produced to assist teams ahead of the 2025-26 season. In this briefing, you will find key information relating to RFU Men's Leagues and the Counties Community Cup Competitions, as well as details on Adult Player Registration and other important topics.

If there is any conflict between this document and Regulation 6 or Regional Organising Committee (ROC) Admin Instructions, then Regulation 6 or the ROC Admin Instructions will take precedence.

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## 2. KEY CHANGES FOR 2025-26

Here are some of the key changes to be aware of for the upcoming season:

# 1. Introduction of play-offs for National and Regional Leagues from 2025-26 season

- In the Men's National leagues, there will be promotion/relegation playoffs between National 1 and Champ Rugby, and between National 1 and National 2.
  - National League Info (click here)
- In the Men's Regional Leagues, there will be promotion/relegation playoffs between Regional 1 and Regional 2, and play-offs for promotion into National 2. As a result, the current cup competition model will be removed for these levels.
  - Regional League Info (click here)
- o For the complete 2025-26 Structured Season document click here
- These changes mean that for this coming season, there will be more meaningful matches throughout the entire season and clubs will be able to generate more revenue through competitive, exciting rugby right up to the final whistle of the league campaign.

#### 2. Change to format for Community Cups for Counties 1 and below

- The initial rounds of the Adult Male Community Cups will take place during the league season and are already included in the published structured season.
- Further information can be found below.

# ADULT MALE COMMUNITY CUPS IN THE COUNTIES LEAGUES - 2025-26

#### INTRO

Following feedback on the RFU Adult Male Community Cup Competitions in the Counties Leagues, changes have been agreed for 2025-26 season.

The two most significant changes are that firstly, the initial rounds will take place during the league season and are already included in the published structured season. Secondly, all First XV teams will be automatically entered, with the option to then withdraw.

#### **ENTRIES**

All First XVs from Counties 1 and below (with the exception of Jersey, Guernsey and

Isle of Man) were automatically entered into the competitions with the option to confirm entry or opt out.

Draws are currently under way and will be communicated to clubs making it clear which clubs are in the competition and which are on the waitlist. Close monitoring of late notice withdrawals will take place this season with a view to introducing potential sanctions in subsequent seasons.

#### STRUCTURE

All competitions will be 64-team straight knockout competitions. Fixtures in the last 32 and 16 rounds may be flipped to help ensure teams get at least one home match. Matches from the quarter-finals onwards will be drawn ahead of time. There will be no flipping of home and away for these fixtures, regardless of the number of home matches that the qualifying teams have had in their competition to date.

#### **COUNTIES 1 & 2**

Counties 1 & 2 will each have their own Championship and both a North and South Plate. The top 64 teams (based on last season's rankings as determined by Best Playing Record) will be placed into each tier's respective Championship.

Relegated teams from Regional 2 and Counties 1 will play in the Counties 1 & Counties 2 Championships, respectively. The next best 128 teams (including promoted teams from Counties 2 and Counties 3) will then be split into the 64-team North or South Plate competitions based on geography.

#### **COUNTIES 3& BELOW**

Counties 3 and below will be grouped together, with four competitions covering these tiers. There will be a Championship and three Plate competitions: North, South and Central. The top 64 teams (based on last season's rankings as determined by Best Playing Record) will be placed into the Counties 3+ Championship. Relegated teams from Counties 2 will play in the Counties 3+ Championship.

The next best 192 teams will then be split into the 64-team North, Central or South Plate competitions, based on geography. In cases where there are more teams in a tier than spaces available, lower teams will be placed on a wait list in the case of late optouts.

#### FIXTURE DATES

Last 64: 20 September 2025 Last 32: 25 October 2025 Last 16: 31 January 2026 Quarter Final: 2 May 2026 Semi-Final: 9 May 2026

Finals: 16/17 May (Plate) and 23/24 May (Championship)

Should a match be abandoned/postponed and require a rearrangement, these should be played on the next available weekend. This should be done even if the slot has had

a league fixture moved into it - as per Regulation 6.51. RFU cup matches take precedence over league matches.

#### **FINALS**

Championship Finals will take place at Allianz Stadium on 23 and 24 May, with Plate Finals taking place at other prestigious venues across the country on 16 and 17 May.

Further information on available travel support will be distributed in due course.

#### **SUMMARY**

The changes to be implemented for the 2025-26 season aim to keep the league structure competitive, sustainable, and aligned with Future Competitions Structure (FCS) principles. These changes will also aim to enhance the rugby experience for players, clubs, and fans alike. We look forward to continued growth and success in our competitions.

# 3. ALLOCATION OF CLUBS TO NATIONAL 2 AND REGIONAL LEAGUES FOR SFASON 2026-27

Based upon feedback from clubs during Season 24/25, the process for allocation of clubs after promotion and relegation into and between National 2 and Regional 2 is currently under review. Should there be any change needed in this area it will be reviewed within the Adult Competition Management Sub-Committee, and subject to approval there, submitted to the Governance Standing Committee for final decision and communicated to clubs in the 'Mid-Season Briefing Document' in January 2026. Should you have any queries regarding this please contact <a href="Competitions-Development@RFU.com">Competitions-Development@RFU.com</a>.

# 4. RELEGATION FROM COUNTIES 1 AND BELOW LEAGUES (POTENTIAL CASCADE EFFECT)

A total of 32 clubs will normally be relegated from the Counties One leagues at the end of each season in accordance with Regulation 6, Appendix 2, Paragraph 4.

Two factors determine where these relegations will fall:

- i) The number of clubs relegated from the Regional Leagues into each of the Counties One leagues. Clubs are relegated into the Counties One league consistent with their CB affiliation (for league purposes).
- ii) Which of the Counties One leagues provide the 5 x promoted runners-up by virtue of finishing in second place to a Lower XV and/or BPR. This will reduce the relegation from each of those leagues by a single club.

The potential relegation ranges from each Counties One league for season 2025-26 are as below:

22- 23	23- 24	24- 25	Counties One Leagues	Potential Rele	_
Actual No. relegated		egated	_	Max.	Min.
0	1	3	Tribute Western West	3	0
2	3	2	Tribute Western North	5	0
3	3	2	Tribute Southern South	5	0

5	2	0	Tribute Southern North	6	0
0	0	2	Hertfordshire	2	0
1	3	2	Eastern Counties	3	0
1	1	2	Essex	3	0
2	1	0	Kent	4	0
0	3	2	Surrey/Sussex	8	1
0	2	1	Middlesex	4	0
0	0	2	Hampshire	4	0
2	2	2	Midlands West (North)	3	1
2	2	2	Midlands West (South)	3	1
3	2	3	Midlands East (North)	3	1
3	2	3	Midlands East (South)	3	1
3	2	2	adm	3	1
			Lancashire/Cheshire		
0	0	0	Cumbria	No relegatio	n – bottom
				leag	jue
3	1	1	Yorkshire	4	2
2	2	1	Durham/Northumberland	3	0
32	32	32			

It is entirely possible that the exact number of clubs relegated from a Counties One league will not be known until the last day of the season.

The higher the maximum figure is the less likely it is to happen but it will nevertheless remain a possibility.

The impact of relegation from Counties One will continue down through the leagues in each respective leg.

# 5. ELECTRONIC MATCH CARD (EMC)

Please find further information about the EMC in the link below: <a href="https://help.rfu.com/support/search/solutions?term=Electronic%20Match%20Card">https://help.rfu.com/support/search/solutions?term=Electronic%20Match%20Card</a>

With the increased use of GMS across the Game we will be putting in place additional support measures to support 'peak season' to deliver an improved level of Technical Support, during such time.

Operational hours			
July to August	Monday to Friday	9am - 5pm	
September to October	Monday to Friday	9am – 8pm	
September to October	Saturday and Sunday	12noon – 8pm	

#### Calls over peak period

This process will be in place from the 5<sup>th</sup> September 2025 to mid/end October 2025 (to be monitored over the tail end of the peak period). The phoneline will be open Friday evenings, Saturday and Sunday business hours.

Phoneline open from: Friday 5pm - 8pm

#### **Business hours**

Monday to Friday: 9am - 8pm

Saturday & Sunday: 12pm - 8pm Phoneline open from: 12pm - 7pm

GMS Service desk number: 02088317764

The GMS service desk number above is to be used by Club Administrators and Match Card Administrators for any match day queries, such as:

- EMC (Electronic Match Card)
- Match day selection for the teams
- Adult Registration (something is preventing the player from being selected for the match)
- Competition issues and submitting the match card.

The phoneline is not for general use. It is only for the above purposes.

# 6. REPORTING RESULTS

The results of all League and Community Cup games should be reported by 17:30h for afternoon fixtures or 22:00h for evening fixtures. If for any reason you cannot do this via the Electronic Match Card (EMC) you must contact your results agent as listed in your regional admin instructions by the above deadlines.

If a match is postponed, abandoned, or a walkover you should NOT complete an EMC but contact the results agent and your league secretary with the details as soon as they are known.

# 7. ADULT PLAYER REGISTRATION

All players playing XV-a-Side contact rugby, at RFU member clubs, are required to be registered to play. This is in line with Regulations 13 & 14.

**EXISTING PLAYERS** (players with an active registration at the end of the 24/25 season)

For those players with an active registration at the end of 24/25 season they will need to renew their registration. A short video showing this can be viewed <a href="here">here</a>. Also, <a href="here">here</a> is an asset which can be sent around to players, using the likes of WhatsApp, showing them how to renew.

**Please note:** Any players wishing to move/be transferred to a new club will firstly need to renew their registration at their former club

**NEW PLAYERS** (players without an active registration at the end of the 24/25 season)

For those players without an active registration at the end of 24/25 season they will need to register with their club. A short video showing this can be viewed <a href="here">here</a> is an asset which can be sent around to players, using the likes of WhatsApp, showing them how to register.

For further support, please take a look at the self-help guides available on <u>Community</u> Rugby Help and on <u>You Tube</u>.

## 8. SANCTIONS RELATED TO NON-REGISTERED PLAYERS

The player registration process requires all players to register prior to the start of the season. For Premiership level to Counties 2 men, and Premiership level to NC2 women, only registered players will be able to be selected on the match card.

- 1. If there are players who take part in a match at these levels, whilst not being registered, then this may result in them being considered ineligible players and a sanction of 5 match points could be applied to the team.
- Clubs have informed us that league integrity is essential and therefore sanctions will be applied at these levels from the start of the season. Players MUST be registered to their club before the game and correctly added to the match card.
- 3. For teams that play at levels below this, i.e. below Counties 2 men and NC2 women, there is still a requirement for players to be registered, however, the names may be added to the match card within 48 hours of the match.

The RFU teams are available to provide any support that you may need in registering players (resources noted in the section above) so please contact them should you need any assistance.

# 9. PRINCIPLE OF SELECTION AND POST TRANSFER DEADLINE

(from the Regional Admin Instructions for teams competing in RFU Leagues)

#### i) General

A club with more than one team competing in the England Rugby Men's Leagues must always adhere to the principle of selection on merit of a 1<sup>st</sup> XV, 2<sup>nd</sup> XV and lower XV. The League Secretary of the lower team(s) may review the result and match squads of such matches if it is suspected that a lower team has been strengthened by a player(s) from higher-level teams.

A club must always honour its highest fixture, either in the England Rugby Men's League or any other RFU recognised competition, it plays in.

If a higher team unjustifiably defaults and the Lower team plays and wins on the same day, then the lower team result shall be set aside and a 0 - 0 win and 5 league points will be awarded to the opposition, unless the League Secretary exceptionally agrees otherwise.

There will be no further sanction against the team fielding the higher-level players, unless the League Secretary deems that this is a recurring offence in which case a further sanction, including removal of League points, may be applied.

If a higher team fixture does not take place for reasons beyond their control or the higher team does not have a fixture, then any lower XVs should be selected as though the higher XV(s) were playing.

#### ii) Post Transfer Deadline

Any player (apart from a nominated front row player) who represented the 1<sup>st</sup> XV in their previous league match will not be eligible to represent the 2<sup>nd</sup> or lower XV, after the Transfer Deadline unless:

(a) they were only playing for the higher team to replace an injured higher team player;

- (b) they are returning from a period of injury, which needs to be more than four (4) playing weekends; or
- (c) the committee exceptionally agrees otherwise. A similar guideline will apply on player movement between  $2^{nd}$  and  $3^{rd}$  XVs where applicable.

The League Secretary may request the playing and/or availability record for any player contributing to a breach of the above guidelines.

## 10. TRAVEL FUNDING FOR 2025-26

We're pleased to announce that we've increased the Travel Funding Support by £200,000 this season. As a result, the travel funding policy for teams playing in the 2025/26 RFU Leagues will remain the same as last season for offshore travel, with a slight change for onshore travel.

For onshore travel, support has been provided to teams in <u>all</u> leagues who have excessive travel to participate in the leagues, and to particularly compensate teams for the excess travel costs above the average, or threshold, for that league level.

Eligible clubs have now received a payment (paid on 15.08.2025), calculated on a per mile basis, for every mile they travel that takes them above the league level average or the threshold set (there will be a minimum compensation in place to avoid very small payments).

For offshore travel, eligible Men's and Women's teams required to travel offshore to the Channel Islands or Isle of Man will receive £2k to support their costs, whilst teams travelling to the Isle of Wight will also receive a payment administered through Hampshire CB as per recent seasons.

Further information can be found in the following link:

https://help.rfu.com/support/solutions/articles/103000360748-travel-funding-policy-2025-26

# 11. REGULATION UPDATE REMINDER

In the 22-23 season the RFU put in place a regulation review strategy (the "Strategy"), the objective of which is to develop and implement regulations which: (a) are necessary, proportionate and pragmatic; (b) achieve the agreed upon objectives of the relevant regulation; (c) by adopting a structured, targeted and periodic review of regulations. This Strategy is a rolling 3 year strategy to ensure the RFU (i) plans its' meetings and focus accordingly, to ensure it identifies and prioritise certain regulations based on an ongoing assessment; and (ii) allows sufficient planning and time within meetings to discuss the relevant regulations.

The table below sets out an executive summary of the key changes which have the most material impact on the Game and on volunteer burden. The below provides a summary but for more detail, please also refer to the full regulations which were uploaded to the website on 1 August 2025:

https://www.englandrugby.com/governance/rules-and-regulations

#### Regulations 6 (Adult Competitions)

Adult Competitions Management Sub-Committee (and the Organising Committee Sub-Committee) have proposed minor changes to Regulation 6 this season, the majority of which are to ensure clarity, aid competition management and league administration, and to further the alignment between the Men's and Women's game.

#### These include:

- (a) changes to the kick-off time regulations to allow Clubs greater flexibility in choosing kick-off times which suit them;
- (b) the introduction of a "Walkover Protocol" in the Women's game (this currently exists in the Men's game but forms part of ROC Administrative Instructions); and
- (c) clarifying that at Women's Level 5 and below, games may start with less than 15 but with no fewer than 10 players, in order to minimise the number of walkovers in games where teams arrive with less than 15 players (this has always been permitted but is now clearer in the regulations).

Additionally, a new Appendix 6 to Regulation 6 will be introduced to regulate the play-off structure in the National Leagues and the Regional Leagues, which will take place for the first time at the end of Season 2025/26. Whilst Appendix 2 (Men's Competition Structure) will deal with automatic promotion and relegation in the RFU Leagues, Appendix 6 will cater for any additional promotion and relegation by virtue of participation in the play-offs.

# Regulation 7 (Player Approaches, Contracts, Payments

It has previously been a requirement for Clubs at Counties 1 (Level 7) to complete a payment of players declaration, regardless of whether material benefits are provided. The proposal is to end the and Player Movement) mandatory requirement at Regional 2 (Level 6), therefore removing Counties 1 clubs from the scope of mandatory submission unless they provide Material Benefit to players. The reason for this is there has traditionally been strong compliance at Counties 1, with a low level of Material Benefit paid to players, and equally a desire to reduce volunteer burden. This change has been agreed as applicable to the submission date of 30 June 2025, however it has now formally been made in regulation for future seasons too.

#### Regulation 9 (Player <u>Safety)</u>

A Regulation 9 Review Group has met to review compliance with RFU Regulation 9 and the policy which sits behind the regulation. The regulatory changes which have arisen from the Working Group focus on aligning regulatory obligations with Government and DCMS UK Concussion Guidelines, and equally to introduce the concept of "Recognise and Remove" to all adult and age grade matches or training sessions (save where a specific concussion protocol applies in the Elite game).

#### Regulation 14 (RFU Registration)

A few minor technical updates have been requested to Regulation 14, which are designed to aid the registration process. These includes clarifications around what happens to a registration on expiry of a loan (which existing in Regulation 14 prior to the rewrite last season) and a requirement around submission of playing contracts to avoid disputes when players under contract wish to register elsewhere.

We have also introduced clarifications around registration status for Premiership players being loaned down (which is only permitted to Champ Rugby) and have updated the permitted number of loan players / EAPs in a match day squad in light of the changes at Champ Rugby level.

#### Regulation 15 (Age Grade Rugby)

As was the case last season, Regulation 15 was released to the game earlier than the other RFU Regulations, and the present version was effective from May 2025. The key changes are summarised below:

- (a) Continuation of the current teenage boys system of allowing combining between U14s and U18s, but making this regulation instead of an exception for the season (this has been an agreed exception on a season-by-season basis since Covid). There is a need for the game to support retention and the checks/balances around playing out of age grade ensure it only happens when required.
- (b) Extend the opportunity of playing up to boys and girls at U9 to U11 who are permanently educated in the year above. They can apply to play rugby up a year to align with their academic year group.
- (c) An U19 playing down for the season should apply across all playing environments. Therefore, a player approved to play down in college rugby has to play down at U18 in all rugby for the season. There will be an ability to withdraw "playing out of age grade" approval if this is not complied with.
- (d) Cluster Registration to become an approval process. The current pilot system (for which a Smartsheet form to record Clusters is already in operation) will become a requirement in order for Clubs to cluster, to address issues of safeguarding and discipline that have arisen as a result of Clusters.

It is the intention of Age Grade Governance to continue to release Regulation 15 at an earlier point in the Season to aid with planning ahead of any age grade summer activity, and equally to ensure that key personnel within the education system have appropriate time to review the new regulations prior to the Summer recess. Please note that Regulation 15 will undergo a wholesale review in Season 2025/26 as part of the Strategy.

# Regulation 19 (Discipline)

The changes to Regulation 19 (excluding the appendices, in respect of which please see below) include:

- (a) permitting the ability to issue an interim or provisional suspension order in respect of an individual team (in addition the whole Club) for initiation-type to investigations or failure to conduct appropriate investigations themselves;
- (b) the ability to recognise sanctions issued within our own game set by Member Clubs (whereas we could only previously recognise sanctions from other sporting bodies); and

(c) to clarify obligations around whistleblowing to remove risk to the RFU in protecting Whistleblowers from action taken by third parties.

#### Regulation 19 (Discipline) Appendices

Following the successful re-write of RFU Regulation 19 in the 2023/24 season, the Regulation 19 Review Group (R19RG) were tasked with reviewing the 7 appendices that accompany that regulation during the 2024/25 season.

The R19RG adopted the same methodology to the process, in that there was a focus to bring Accuracy, Brevity and Clarity (ABC) to the appendices and to ensure that they were easily understood by the many volunteers who will need to interact with the regulations. Whilst a number of the appendices required minimal or no amendments, the appendices related to citing, discipline process guidance and Age-grade discipline have been significantly changed.

Due to the functional nature or mandatory adoption of World Rugby regulations within appendices 1, 2, 3 and 7, there have been no changes to these appendices.

The adult citing regulations (Appendix 4), RFU practise notes and guidance (Appendix 5) and Age-grade discipline regulations (Appendix 6) have been re-written following appropriate consultation. Changes include the following:

- (a) Appendix 4: The citing regulations have been restructured to separate the different processes that apply to the top levels in the game, where a Citing Commissioner is appointed, to that of the community game, where a Club is responsible for the citing process. There have been minimal changes to the regulations themselves with the exception of the introduction of the ability for a Club citing to be referred to an RFU independent Citing Commissioner (CC) to determine if there is a case to answer. Should the CC determine that there is no realistic chance of the citing being proven then the citing will be dismissed and the fee returned to the citing club. This regulation amendment has been made to help reduce volunteer burden for the CB discipline teams when presented with cases that are clearly below a Red Card threshold by removing the need to convene a hearing panel for a case.
- (b) Appendix 5: The guidance in this appendix applies to the concept of 'recklessness' and also to application of appropriate sanctions for cases that have a Top End Entry Point. The subject of this appendix has not been amended, however, it has been re-written in a consistent manner that is easier to understand for both Clubs involved in the process and for the disciplinary panels applying the regulations.
- (c) Appendix 6: The regulation has then been split into separate sections that apply to the different areas of the Age-grade game (Clubs & Academies, and Schools & Colleges). Whilst the focus of the re-write has been to make the appendix more readable and accessible, there have been a number of regulation changes. These include; (a) The mandatory requirement to report all discriminatory behaviour direct to the RFU. (b) Stipulation that Age-grade judgments will not be published in any unredacted form.

	(c) Ability for the NAGDS to determine if a player can resume playing after a minimum period of 6 months provisional suspension, should the case not be resolved at that point. This is likely to be considered in cases that are subject to Police investigation and can continue for periods of more than 2 years. (d) Ability to refer a Citing for an independent review to determine if there is a case to answer and if not the Citing can be dismissed. (e) Mandated time periods for hearing citings.		
Regulation 21 (Safeguarding)	It should be noted that Regulation 21 will undergo a wholesale review next season in line with the Strategy.		
	The only change made this season was to reflect the updated deadline for the Club Safeguarding Audit which is <b>24 October 2025</b> .		
Academy, Colleges and Education League (ACE) Boys and Girls Competition	Last season saw a number of unfulfilled fixtures. Whilst Part B of the regulations refers to a "Postponed Match Notification Procedure", there is not one in place in the ACE Competitions which is robust enough to provide for unfulfilled fixtures in what is a performance competition. This has therefore been included in Part A to assist participants and the Disputes Committee with the requirements. The other key change to the ACE Girls regulations concerns the uplift in medical minimum standards. These were included in last season's regulation as guidance, ahead of implementation in Season 2025/26.		
Premiership Women's Rugby Regulations	Changes of note included the increase in the number of dual- registered players from 15 to 20 to allow clubs to have more players available for the Cup Competition, proposed wording around postponed matches for reasons other than pitch issues and the introduction of a new extra time protocol for knock out matches.		
Championship Regulations	To align with the launch of Champ Rugby in Season 2025/26, the previous Championship Regulations have undergone a review in light of proposed changes which have been put forward by the Champ Rugby Board. Whilst the vast majority of the regulations remain broadly unchanged from the previous iteration of the Championship Regulations (save for drafting tweaks and terminology updates), the key changes which will come into effect from Season 2025/26 are as follows:		
	(d) Competition Structure: the 14 teams will play each other on a home and away basis over 26 rounds. At the conclusion of the regular season, a play-off structure will be implemented at the top and bottom of Champ Rugby. At the top, the teams finishing 3 to 6 will play quarter finals, the winners of which will play the teams finishing 1-2 in the semi-finals, before a final to determine the winner of Champ Rugby. At the bottom, the team finishing 14 will be automatically relegated, with the teams finishing 12 and 13 playing off and the loser playing the winner of the National League Play-Offs. The winner will participate in Champ Rugby in Season 2026/27 and the loser will participate in National League 1 (at all times subject to the National League clubs meeting the minimum operating standards for entry into Champ Rugby).		

- (e) EQP Protocol: Following the implementation of similar systems in the Men's Premiership and Premiership Women's Rugby, Champ Rugby will introduce a mandatory number of England Qualified Players in a match-day squad, which will be set at 18. This will be assessed on the basis of a rolling average across two qualification periods (broadly the 1st and 2nd half of the season), with the potential for the implementation of points deductions at the end of each qualification period for any clubs who (having accounted for any applicable credits) do not meet the average of 18 EQPs over the course of that period.
- (f) Loan Players / EAPs: In previous seasons, Regulation 14 has allowed Championship clubs to have up to three Loan Players and up to ten England Academy Players in their match day squad. The proposal within the regulations is to reduce this to six players, of which no more than 3 can be Loan Players and the rest (up to the maximum of 6) can be EAPs. Whilst this is clearly a significant reduction on the face of it, the concept of "Season Long Loan Players" has been introduced. There shall be no limit on the number of Season Long Loan Players that a Champ Rugby club can have in its match day squad (whether they are EAPs or not) and this has been proposed to encourage Premiership clubs to allow players to play for a Champ Rugby club for the whole season, and to protect the integrity of the competition. These changes have been extensively debated and endorsed by a "Player Development Group" which has expertise from Champ Rugby, RFU Performance and Academies, and Premiership Rugby.