



IRFU

Club Engagement Programme - March 2012

Report compiled from meetings between Sept and Dec 2011

THE VALUES THROUGH WHICH THE GAME IS PLAYED

INTEGRITY

Integrity is central to the fabric of the Game and is generated through honesty and fair play.

RESPECT

Respect for team mates, opponents, match officials, and those involved in the Game is paramount.

SOLIDARITY

Rugby provides a unifying spirit that leads to lifelong friendships, camaraderie, teamwork and loyalty which transcends cultural, geographic, political and religious differences.

PASSION

Rugby people have a passionate enthusiasm for the Game. Rugby generates excitement, emotional attachment, and a sense of belonging to the global Rugby Family.

DISCIPLINE

Discipline is an integral part of the game both on and off the field and is reflected through adherence to the Laws, the Regulations and Rugby's core values.

these values are part of the International Rugby Board rugby values

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This document outlines the IRFU perspective of the present landscape of Club Rugby, developed from meeting with 219 clubs over 42 meetings during September - December 2011. Where possible, the club perspective has been cross referenced to information obtained from other sources, including Vision 2020 and club, school and player surveys that the IRFU conducted.

During the meetings a wealth of information was collected. Unfortunately there may be some club perspectives which have been missed or not correctly reflected. If this is the case, Clubs are invited to write responses or suggestions to this report by corresponding directly with Scott Walker, Director of Rugby Development & Club Game, c/o IRFU 10-12 Lansdowne Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin.

IRFU CLUB ENGAGEMENT MEETINGS



BETWEEN September and December 2011, the IRFU in conjunction with the Branches set out to meet with its member clubs to listen to the challenges and opportunities facing them. The meetings provided an ideal opportunity for the IRFU to communicate its perception of the state and structure of the game and to share information on how revenue is generated and subsequently distributed for the development of rugby¹. In partnership with the four Branches, 219 clubs out of 232 clubs (94%) engaged in the initiative via 42 meetings convened in 21 different venues across Ireland (see table below).

CONNACHT	MUNSTER	LEINSTER	ULSTER
Galway (3 meetings)	Cork (4 meetings)	Dublin (7 meetings)	Belfast (4 meetings)
Castlebar	Limerick (3 meetings)	Navan	Ballymena (2 meetings)
Sligo	Killarney (2 meetings)	Naas	Portadown (2 meetings)
Ballinasloe	Clonmel (2 meetings)	Carlow	Fivemiletown
	Clonakilty	Enniscorthy	Letterkenny (2 meetings)
	Ennis	Tullamore	

The series of meetings which enabled debate and discussion also provided an ideal opportunity for the IRFU and Branches to emphasise the crucial importance of Club Rugby. At each venue, the IRFU and Branch were welcomed. Each meeting was different, and there was often a passionate exchange of views. While there were differences of opinion everyone left the meetings with a common desire to strengthen club rugby and to uphold it as the bedrock of the Irish game.

A wealth of information and insight was obtained. This report outlines the IRFU perspective of the key issues and opportunities discussed by the 219 clubs during the meetings. However, it is only the first step in a long engagement process to develop the IRFU's next strategic plan 2012-2016. Over the coming months the IRFU will engage with the Branches to further discuss the issues highlighted and actions proposed in this report – it is important that the issues identified are discussed at Branch level to allow local solutions to be identified and implemented. As the IRFU continues to formulate the strategic plan for the period 2012-2016, there will be further opportunities for clubs to contribute to the debate through convened focus groups, Branch Committees or by direct correspondence with the IRFU.

An exercise of this nature could not have taken place without the assistance of a number of people. We thank -

- The Club and Branch representatives for their open and honest contributions
- The Chairmen of the Provincial Domestic Game/Rugby Committees who facilitated each meeting
- IRFU/Branch delegates who were in attendance
- IRFU/Branch staff who attended and provided information on issues and programmes

¹It is also the intention of the IRFU/Branches to undertake a similar exercise with schools during 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RUGBY is in a good place, with high public profile and a public perception that it represents positive values and aspirations throughout Ireland. The Game is growing as measured by the number of clubs and number of participants. However, there are several challenges which may limit the opportunity for the IRFU, Branches and Clubs, as a collective, to capitalise on this opportunity. A summary of the issues is outlined in the diagram below – each of these topics is outlined in more detail in this document.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Challenge to rugby ethos and values.
Reduction in Club Revenue (sponsorship down 50%, Bar revenue down 40%).
Minority of clubs with significant bank borrowings.
Emigration affecting the fielding of teams.
Social changes to youth and volunteers.
Other sporting codes looking to maintain their market share

THE RUGBY CLUB

Internal cohesion of rugby club structures.
Standard of Facilities a barrier to recruitment.
Requirement for clubs to become more welcoming to new members, especially mothers and female players.
Communication between IRFU/Branch.
Lost generation of Volunteers.

ADULT RUGBY

Erosion of social rugby and emergence of alternative games options.
Financial inducements undermining club loyalty and volunteerism.
Prohibitive cost of team insurance.
Barriers to the transition of youth and schools players to adult game.

WOMEN'S RUGBY

An image and perception issue still prevail - clubs need to recognise the opportunity.
Challenge of running an All Ireland league from a small adult playing population.
Widening gap between competitive and social rugby.

AGE GRADE RUGBY

Lack of facilities and resources for expanding male and female game.
Supporting coaches from non-rugby background.
Lack of competent coaches at higher age bands.
Poaching of players at age grade rugby.
Increase in demand from schools for coaches.

IRFU

Rugby riding on a wave of public support - need to capitalise.
IRFU to take greater consideration of the cascade of information between IRFU-Branches-Clubs.
Significant investment in Domestic Rugby not understood by Branches and Clubs.
Funding of Provincial Professional Game to ensure National Team performance funds remainder of the game.

While this report does indicate some solutions to issues raised, it also highlights a number of issues that require further debate at all levels of the game. Since the Club Engagement meetings, the IRFU in conjunction with the Branches has implemented a number of cross-provincial working parties to commence the discussion. The next stage of the programme will be a series of focus groups (May 2012) to discuss possible solutions and initiatives which can be included in the IRFU's strategic plan.

THE ROLE OF THE IRFU IN FUNDING THE GAME

It is 16 years since the game became 'open', and the interface between the IRFU, Branches and its member clubs is still evolving. In comparison to Soccer and Rugby League which went 'open' over 100 years ago, the IRFU has only just started this journey. Unfortunately change is never easy, but what is important is that club ethos and values are maintained as we move forward in developing the game in Ireland.

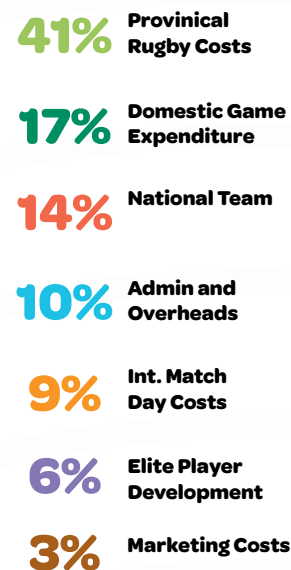
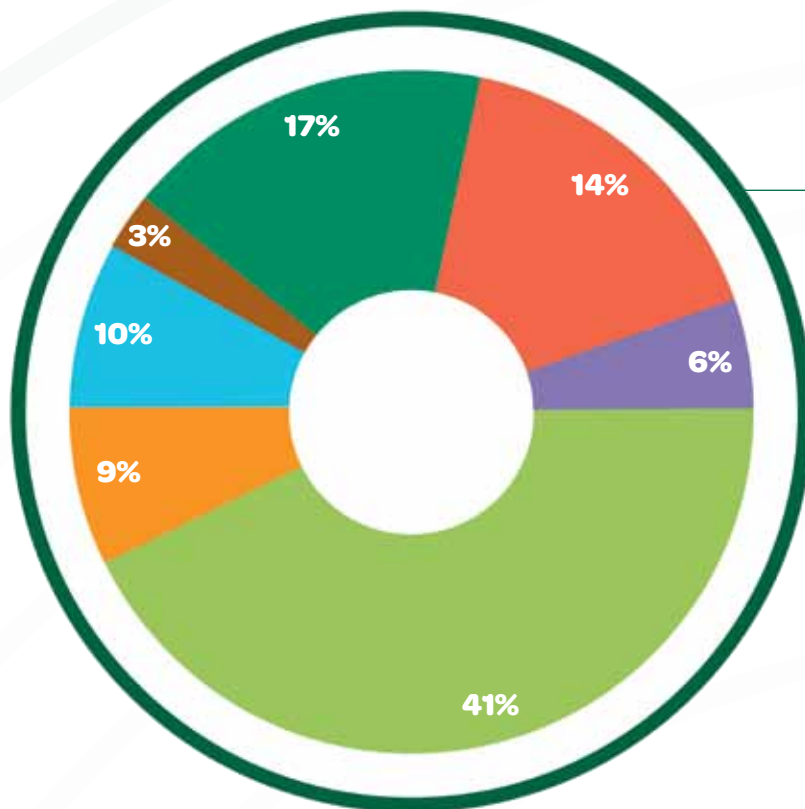
'Virtuous Circle' of Irish Rugby



The Irish Rugby model ensures that all clubs share in the success of the IRFU. The commercial success of the IRFU allows the whole game to be funded. The Irish National Team generates 81% of the IRFU's revenue, with provincial participation in ERC/Pro12 contributing an additional 13% of income. International and provincial success raises public awareness, leading to increased commercial revenues and indirectly to greater numbers of participants. In order for the National Team to remain competitive there is a requirement for the IRFU to reinvest considerably (47% of expenditure) to support the provincial professional teams and academies. This is a necessary expenditure to ensure that this 'virtuous circle' of Provincial participation leading to National success continues.

However, the club and school game are equally important as this is where the players of the future are developed: this was recently reinforced by the adoption of the **IRFU National Player Succession Strategy** which encourages and emphasises the recruitment of Irish eligible players into the professional game. To support the development of the game the IRFU currently allocates approximately €9M (17% of expenditure) to grassroots rugby. €6M of this is from the **Irish National Team** dividend and €3M is an allocation provided by the **Irish Sports Council**². **Sport NI** also funds a number of development posts in the Ulster Branch to support the development of the game within their jurisdiction.

IRFU Forecasted Expenditure (ex. Depreciation)



The IRFU has elected to 'empower' the Branches to develop the game at club and school level – this combines national leadership with local decision-making. The IRFU manages its relationship with each of the Branches through a Service Level Agreement (SLA, or Heads of Agreement) which outlines the respective roles and responsibilities of each party. Through these SLAs the IRFU allocates a total of €3.25M annually to the Branches to support development staff and programmes. Branches also allocate resources from their provincial game to support local initiatives.

Annually the IRFU reviews each Branch's performance against its obligations, and collects information from a number of sources, including club & school surveys, to support this review. The outcomes of these reviews influence future funding and programmes.

The table below outlines how the IRFU's total €9M club and school budget is allocated to developing the game:

% Allocation	Programmes supported by the IRFU investment into the Domestic Game
30%	Direct investment to clubs and schools (€ 2.7m, i.e. club support scheme, insurance subvention, schools of Ireland scheme, player reward scheme, womens rugby etc.)
37%	Indirect investment to Clubs and schools through IRFU funded Branch Programmes (€3.25m, i.e. SLA funding, development officers and core operational grants to administer Branch and competitions, etc.)
10%	Indirect investment to clubs and schools through IRFU funded national programmes (€ 0.985m; Welcoming Clubs, Play Rugby, club development, loan schemes, community programmes and national administration of the game)
4%	Competition and Participation Costs (€0.365m, i.e. travel grants, referee travel & fees, prize money, AIL marketing/promotions etc.)
7%	Coach and referee training and development programmes (€ 0.620m; including 5 x Referee development officers)
12%	Age grade and amateur national teams (€1.08m, U18 Club, U18 School, U19, Women's National Team, Club Int. Team)

Of the 81% of IRFU revenue generated through the National Team, 24% is generated through ticket sales (excluding 10 year tickets). Traditionally the main channel for distribution of international tickets has been through the clubs via the Branches, giving the clubs and volunteers exclusivity in accessing tickets. Surplus tickets returned by the clubs are first sold through supporters clubs and then to the open market. The IRFU preference is for all tickets to be sold through the clubs.

At the beginning of the club engagement meetings there was a significant level of animosity towards the IRFU and Branches as a result of the proposed ticketing distribution and payment policy. Previously IRFU and Branch operations assumed that every ticket was sold through the club distribution system, which wasn't the case during the 2010 Autumn Internationals. To ensure that the IRFU maximised the revenues and attendances at the Aviva Stadium, there needed to be a process that allowed the clubs to return any unsold tickets for the IRFU to re-sell through other channels. While the issue raised a passionate debate, it also highlighted club finances and the non-financial value of tickets to volunteers. The club engagement meetings became a conduit to the IRFU Committee, whose members listened to the views of the clubs and responded accordingly.

It is imperative for the future success and financing of the game that Clubs, Branches and IRFU maximise the value of international tickets and ensure that the demand to attend international matches at the Aviva Stadium exceeds supply. The scarcity value of tickets is crucial to the successful marketing of tranches of 10 year tickets in 2013 and 2015. This is not only a prerequisite for paying off the bank overdraft facility put in place to cover the cost of building the Aviva Stadium, but also in finding future operational funding. If there is any drop below full capacity attendances for international matches at the Aviva stadium then there could be a decrease in the demand for, or value of, ten year tickets with a consequential requirement for the IRFU to adjust its future budgets to reflect any shortfall, including the Domestic Game Budget.



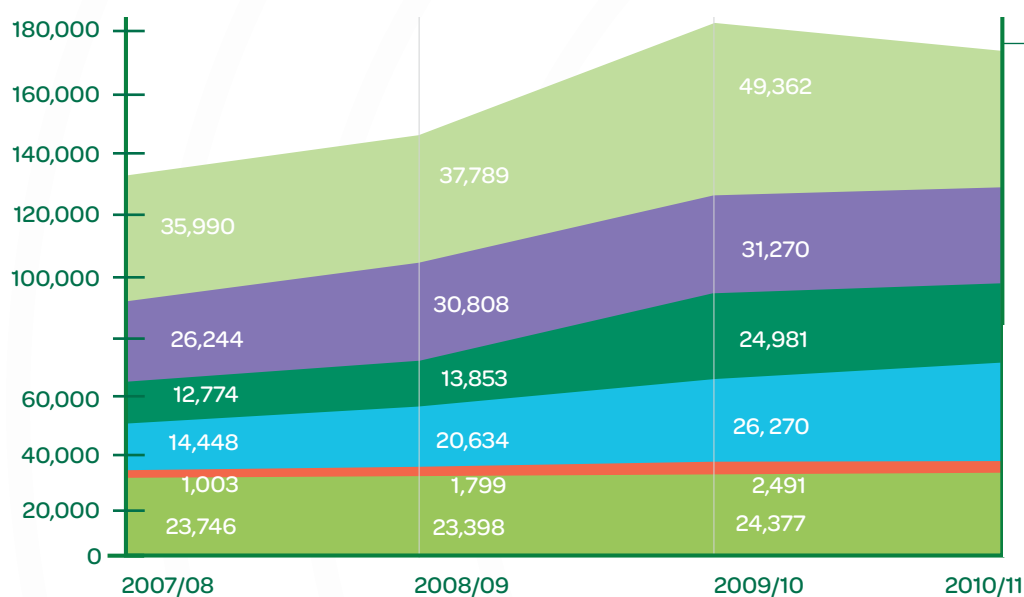
THE GROWTH OF THE GAME

THE popularity of rugby in Ireland continues to grow on the back of International and provincial success. It is evident that the increased exposure, values and ethos of the game is encouraging more young boys and girls to take up the sport. For our clubs, this has created a number of challenges in accommodating all who wish to play the game. Visit any Mini Rugby session and you will witness 150-200 young players being assisted by up to 30 volunteers coaching, managing equipment and administrating.

Club rugby operates almost entirely on the back of club volunteers. The hours contributed by club administrators are immeasurable; **the meetings reinforced this**; and the IRFU should never forget that it is volunteerism which is at the core of the sport. The IRFU possesses a strong volunteer philosophy through the management of the game, from club rugby through to the IRFU Committees.

The significant growth of the game over the last four years is outlined in the graph below. Over this period there have been an additional 21 clubs created, resulting in a national total of 232 clubs. During the meetings we heard from many young clubs who have been started by communities who wished to have a rugby presence due to the sport's values and ethos. In some cases the clubs were formed by parents who did not have a rugby background, but none the less wished their children to be involved in a sport which instilled the values which they hold in high regard.

What was evident from the meetings was that the youth game continues to grow and with the development of girls sections is especially buoyant at 13-16 years. The Youth Game has evolved significantly over the last 20 years and in most clubs now plays an important part in producing 'home grown talent' for their senior teams.



IRFU Playing Numbers 2007-2011

- Schools Development Programme
- Age Grade (Secondary schools leagues)
- Mini Rugby
- Age Grade (Club)
- Senior Women
- Senior Males



Our Rugby schools (78 schools, participating in provincial school cups) have over 800 teams playing over 12,000 matches per season. In addition, there are over 300 development schools participating in either leagues or blitzes. The importance of the schools sector is emphasised by the fact that 75-80% of Ireland's provincial and international players have at some stage been part of this system.

To support all these teams there is a requirement for appropriately competent coaches. Over the last 10 years the IRFU has accredited 10,518 coaches and 2,411 referees (including associate referees). While this report highlights some issues around club volunteers, it is important to note that there is a large number of past players who have transferred into coaching. Our coaching, refereeing and conditioning training programmes have been recognised by the IRB who regularly use IRFU staff to assist in the training of developing Unions.

However, there are some underlying challenges in volunteering, coaching and refereeing which are beginning to develop (outlined later in this report). These sit alongside a raft of other high-level issues which were identified during the meetings and which will undoubtedly influence the future landscape of Irish rugby. This report will examine each one before looking individually at the issues which affect particular sectors of the game.



LOOKING FROM THE OUTSIDE IN - VISION 2020³

IN parallel with the club engagement meetings, the IRFU commissioned research to be conducted through Millward Brown Lansdowne omnibus interviews and surveys to assess the public's perception of Rugby today and its perception of the future. Telephone interviews were conducted on a random sample of 1,504 individuals who were not active participants in rugby (equal split male/females). The omnibus interviews were supplemented through an online survey.

The survey found that international and provincial success and the resulting media coverage have fostered a huge level of goodwill and enthusiasm for the sport. Irish people may have been let down by institutions but not by sport, its values, teams or personalities. This makes rugby well positioned to lead the way in embodying the kind of national attributes that Irish people are seeking as they look to the future. The diagram below indicates the key words used during the interviews, highlighting the interviewees' perception of Irish Rugby (note: the more frequently the word was used the larger the font).

What people think of Irish Rugby - Overview



Words based on 'agree strongly'

The influence of Rugby today is demonstrated by the fact that more than seven in ten (72%) believe that rugby as a sport makes a significant contribution to Irish Society, whilst one in three (35%) believe that rugby as a sport contributes the most to Ireland. Responses to statements like 'Success for Irish Rugby improves the image of Ireland internationally' (59% agree strongly) and 'International success in Irish Rugby boosts the morale of the nation' (57% agree strongly), indicate that these are the two strongest attributes of Irish Rugby. At a time when the country's national morale has rarely been

³ This survey was conducted by Millward Brown Lansdowne as part of the IRFU 2020 vision programme in the Republic and Northern Ireland. The research was designed to measure a number of factors in relation to Rugby, sport more generally, the role of sport in society and attitudes towards the country more generally and aspirations for it in 2020.

lower there is an opportunity for rugby and its leaders to inspire. The desires of the Irish people for how the country should develop by 2020 are very much in tune with the values respondents identified for Irish Rugby: Ambition, Dynamism, and Competitiveness – Rugby can and should embody many of the characteristics that people seek. Rugby must promote these values and be seen to promote them, not only in terms of the national team, but in terms of how the sport connects with communities all over the Island of Ireland.

While the attitudes towards Rugby are very positive for the most part, there is a disconnect that must be addressed for the game to develop further. The survey identified that ‘passive’ support for rugby is widely distributed across all social classes, but a tradition and complexity issue arises in terms of accessing the game either as a player and/or spectator. A primary barrier to entry for many people is the statement ‘it is hard to get involved in Rugby in my area, even if I wanted to’ – 1 in 3 agree. This opinion is held equally firmly in all regions – indicating that people feel it is difficult to get involved – a primary impediment to the growth of the game in Ireland. In summary Rugby generates a national ‘feel good factor’; however, this feel good factor is bred by success and cannot be taken for granted. The challenge is to cascade this to our Branches and clubs to ensure that they benefit from this strong social position.



THE UNDERLYING CHALLENGES

Key issues:

- Finance – many clubs are finding it difficult to balance income and expenditure.
- Emigration – player numbers are being impacted by movements in society, especially in rural areas.
- Social changes – clubs are having to deal with time-limited players, and with the emergence of ‘Generation Y’.
- Volunteering – culture has changed, and players are no longer converting to volunteers in the same numbers.
- Other sporting codes – see the IRFU as a rival, and seek to limit its recruitment and community engagement

i. Reduction in club revenue

Unfortunately, financial issues now dominate club committee conversations. The IRFU does analyse the annual accounts submitted by clubs, and thus was already aware that there had been a 40-50% decrease in club sponsorship as well as a 30-40% reduction in bar revenue, attributed largely to changes in Drink Driving regulations. While clubs indicated that they were actively fundraising to make up these shortfalls, there was concern that they generally turn to the same group of club members time after time in the attempt to generate financial resources.

Clubs confirmed that membership subscriptions are now their main revenue stream. At the height of demand for International tickets, clubs had a large number of inactive members whose only interest was to access International tickets. Over the last three years, however, there has been a reduction in the number of these ‘inactive’ members, ostensibly due to decreased levels of disposable income and a perception that International tickets can be gained from other sources. The IRFU has acknowledged the ticketing mistakes of Autumn 2010, and it has now developed an affordable pricing strategy and an effective ticket distribution system. However, as indicated earlier, it is in the best interest of both the clubs and the IRFU to ensure that clubs continue to be the primary route for the distribution of tickets.

At the meetings most clubs indicated that they have been required to reduce their expenditure over the last three years. This is reflected especially in a reduction in rugby expenditure; however, a number of clubs stated that they had financial exposure due to long term contracts with coaches. All clubs suggested that the payment of 1st Team coaches should continue, as it was beneficial to them to recruit indigenous coaching expertise. However, concern was expressed at the variation in coaching costs. It was suggested that the IRFU provide guidance notes on appointment criteria and remuneration for club coaches. Similar discussion occurred on medical costs, and the Branches have responded through specific seminars to assist clubs with managing these costs.

This reduction in expenditure is confirmed by a review of the annual accounts. However, the accounts also indicate that there is a further requirement for clubs to manage their expenditure in order to reflect reducing incomes. The cumulative deficit across all rugby clubs, difference between income and expenditure, is approximately €600,000. What is of much greater concern is that the cumulative bank borrowings (reflected on the balance sheets) across 102 clubs totals €24.6 Million⁴, with these clubs paying annual interest of approximately €800K. There are 13 clubs (of which 11 are Senior Clubs) with bank loans greater than €400,000. From a positive point of view, 50% of clubs had no loans.



All clubs praised the IRFU lottery, ‘Your Club, Your Country’. The IRFU will consider operating the lottery again in the future

⁴This does not include personal loans which clubs may have with members.



***We had no choice but to stop paying players, but the upside is that we found our volunteers coming back
(Munster Club)***

***"...we have a great team in Sydney who are all paying their subs ..."
(Connacht Club)***

Several clubs appear to have focused their financial resources on being competitive on the pitch, possibly aspiring to take the club to a level beyond their means. If/When this ambition failed there was a knock-on negative affect on club membership, on the number of volunteers and on the modernisation/upkeep of facilities. This was articulated by a number of clubs who must be praised for their honesty in describing the detrimental impact this failed ambition has had on their club culture and members. However, there is a large number of clubs who have managed their resources correctly and who did not over-extend themselves in the boom time, as a result of which they are now strong community clubs with good facilities, resulting in greater levels of participation.

ii. Emigration

Emigration was evidenced across all four Branches, with the greatest impact highlighted in the rural areas of Leinster, Connacht, West Munster and North West Ulster. Analysis of data from the Branches indicates that there are 48 fewer teams playing each week in comparison to last season. Dublin and Belfast clubs retain healthy numbers, possibly due to the internal migration of young adults to the city in search of work, and this is reflected by club transfers and the retention of adult teams. However, urban clubs are suffering from a decrease in volunteer support, perhaps due to commuting parents who are away during the week and wish to maximise their time with their family on weekends.

Ulster clubs have noticed a slight decrease in the annual migration of students to Scotland as a result of the excellent tertiary educational programmes now within Ulster. It is expected that the proposed increase in tertiary fees in Scotland and England may in future influence the decision of a greater number of local players to continue their education in Northern Ireland.

However, it also needs to be highlighted that a number of teams have folded due to the loss of players in key positions, especially front row forwards. The impact of emigration means that players from lower teams are needed to support the club's Senior Squad. It is important that we seek alternatives to allow the game to be played, either with modified competition regulations and/or playing laws, as this ensures that players can play the game and be retained within it. For example, in strong GAA areas, clubs create a 10-a-side league in the early part of the season to encourage players to join the club; this ensures that when the Hurling season finishes, there is an established team which the players can join and thus enter a 15-a-side league. While encouraging alternatives it is imperative that the 15-a-side game continues to be considered as the primary game for all clubs.

iii. Social Changes

"...in my day it was always better, players were more loyal ..." As with any exercise of this nature, there were the reflections of yesteryear, especially before the game became 'open'. These reflections were important as they highlighted vital lessons from the past. Ireland has evolved in the last 10 years, and it was evident from the meetings that two key social changes for the future have taken place.

The first is that players are ending their playing careers earlier. There are a number of external pressures in life, including work commitments, family commitments and other pursuits, which have resulted in the player becoming time-limited. Players no longer wish to give time to play both days of a weekend. If they sub on a Saturday they are often not available for Sunday rugby – simply we need to play the game at the convenience of the

player. An example is Munster seconds playing on a Monday night thus giving the first team subs a weekend off.

In the past the children of male adult players would commence playing Mini Rugby as the father stopped playing, and the father would support them through coaching or administrating – and thus there was a natural transition from playing to volunteering. Unfortunately, today many adult players finish playing earlier and have families later, which may result in a break from the club. It was acknowledged by all clubs that there is a 'lost generation' of volunteers (aged 35-50 years). During 2012, the IRFU will be operating a pilot 'Touch Rugby' Programme with the primary aim of retaining players over 35 years in clubs, thus maintaining the club contact with the hope that they become volunteers.

The second social change is the emergence of 'Generation Y', the young people of today who have grown up in a modern culture, where technology's influence has led to instant availability and information and where there is no longer a culture of subservience to captains, coaches etc. Clubs and their officers have therefore moved from having an expectation of club loyalty to being subject to individual demands. This generation also has access to unlimited information on rugby and with this knowledge they are prepared to challenge and question. To keep this generation engaged, there is a requirement for clubs to be welcoming, to invest in quality coaching, to make the game as convenient as possible and to communicate in an engaging manner through appropriate media.

iv. Future club administrators

As stated above, clubs and indeed the IRFU as a whole, are dependent on passionate and motivated volunteers for their survival. The financial issues reported earlier create a double problem, as they not only threaten the viability of the club game but they also place an enormous burden on these volunteers. The constant need to discuss finance ahead of rugby and being asked to contribute financially to balance the books will, if not managed correctly, lead to an erosion of clubs' volunteer base.

During the meeting, the relationship between volunteerism and payment of players was highlighted. While success recruited supporters, it also made the club committee very isolated as they sought to fund and support an elite group of players. Often it was difficult to recruit volunteers and other sections of the clubs were not willing to support the committee as the majority of resources were going to one team.

Clubs have recognised that there is an increased presence of mothers on the side lines. These ladies have an influential role on the sporting pursuits of their children. Mothers (and females generally) are an untapped volunteer resource. Clubs need to become more shrewd in the recruitment of females to key posts within a club.



“... parents bring their children to rugby due to the implied values of discipline and respect. These are the two values that many parents want their children to be exposed to. The IRFU needs to work to ensure that these values are explicit, since when we lose them we lose our advantage over other sports.”
(Munster Club)

“... In our village we have one sport where the two local clubs quarrel and another sport which is putting players as young as 9 years of age into panels, and parents come down to rugby and see a fun disciplined environment where Johnny gets a game regardless of size or ability...this is why rugby is popular...”
(Connacht Club)

Also highlighted previously is the widening in the age gap between players and volunteers. This has roots in society as a whole, but is symptomatic of the basic problem that players are not converting to volunteers once they finish playing. This has no single cause but can be linked to a number of factors – the decline in the importance of social rugby, the loss of club loyalty due to player inducements, the increase in family and work commitments, to name but a few. With fewer new volunteers coming forward, an increasing workload is being placed on a smaller number of volunteers, which leads to overload and burn-out.

During the course of the meetings, clubs discussed their volunteer structures. Some clubs were extremely proactive in recruiting volunteers and co-opting players onto committees to understand the operation of the club. However, it was evident that a number of clubs lack clarity in volunteer roles/responsibilities, which leads to the ‘one cap fits all’ approach, and those who do volunteer get burdened with a lot more tasks. It is clear that specific roles and responsibilities are required to attract and retain new volunteers. Without role clarity and proper volunteer succession planning in clubs, it will be difficult to attract the future leaders of the game.

v. Other sporting codes

Rugby is a sport which is respected for its values, and these are reflected in the way we play, referee, administer and lead the game. A number of clubs have noted an increase in the number of families, especially mothers, on the sidelines supporting their children. Mothers are frequently the main influence on a child’s participation, and it is proposed that the rugby values (i.e., respect and discipline), together with the established structure of the IRFU Long Term Player Development programme and the fact that Mini Rugby has no leagues and cups, have collectively made rugby more attractive than other sporting codes.

The popularity of rugby has not gone unnoticed by our fellow field sports people. They envy the IRFU and Branch leadership for implementing a number of initiatives and programmes which have given the sport credibility with players and families. They will no doubt redouble their recruitment efforts in order to retain their share of the market. While during the meetings evidence was tabled of ‘underhand actions’ on the part of other codes to discourage players from taking up rugby, the IRFU policy is that, while rugby has a responsibility to develop the youth of the future, it is equally important that young people are encouraged to lead an active lifestyle through playing whatever sport they see fit. **We all need to keep working to retain our sporting values and ensure Irish Rugby retains integrity in the way we operate and develop the future youth.**

AGE GRADE RUGBY

Key points:

- Mini Rugby numbers have reached capacity in a number of clubs.
- Many new coaches are from a non-rugby background. They are welcome, but require support and mentoring.
- Growth of the Youth Game is restricted by a lack of competent and qualified coaches.
- New methods of communication are required to retain 'Generation Y' youngsters
- Requirement for Clubs and Schools to work in partnership.
- Integration of girls into Clubs.

THE success of the National and Provincial Teams, with the accompanying media profile, has increased the popularity of rugby. All clubs have noticed a dramatic increase in the numbers of Mini Rugby players. For many years Mini Rugby was viewed more or less as a crèche facility; this has changed as clubs have become more welcoming, resulting in a change in the profile of the parental support, with an increased number of families and mothers now providing assistance. The combination of the IRFU Long Term Player Development model, well structured clubs, and the strong rugby values, has resulted in rugby becoming a sport of choice for parents.

This exponential growth in Mini Rugby has seen the game grow faster than the club resources which support it. Clubs indicated that while there is a plentiful supply of parents wishing to coach at Mini Rugby level, many of these parents do not come from a rugby background. During one meeting we heard from a club which has 11 Mini Rugby teams, nine of which are coached by parents with no background in the game. Many clubs have worked hard to support such coaches (many of whom are competent coaches from other field sports) with in-house mentoring and co-coaching alongside more experienced individuals.

The IRFU coaching courses emphasise the importance of all players learning "through the game", (ie not through meaningless drills), and while this game approach can be seen as a challenge to coaches coming to Mini Rugby, all parents should be re-assured that the coaching courses are a very supportive, educational and beneficial way to give novice coaches the foothold they need to flourish with their young players.

The impact of the Club Community Rugby Officer (CCRO) in developing club/school links was highlighted, and for many clubs this is one of the main conduits for the recruitment of players. From the meetings the IRFU understands the importance of this scheme, and if implemented correctly with the Play Rugby Programme, can bring huge dividends for the club; the IRFU will seek ways of continuing to fund this programme. However, the value of the CCRO resource is diminished if a club does not have an effective retention structure facilitating the transfer of players from Mini-Rugby into the youth game. Unfortunately there is still a disconnect within some clubs between the Mini Rugby section and the youth game, and clubs need to reflect on this issue to ensure that they maintain a joined-up pathway.



"... our Mini Rugby coordinator has a great strategy. Each week he walks the touch line and taps 10 mothers on the shoulder and tells them to turn up the next week with their boots. Guess what, they do, and they actively assist with the coaching. They were just waiting for an invite..."
(Leinster Club)

In general clubs reported that there was a healthy growth in youth numbers up to U16s, and this is reflected in the IRFU data. However, in the age groups post U16s there is a significant drop off in the number of teams. Generally it is accepted that this is a phenomenon not unique to Rugby and is caused by a number of 'distractions' which are encountered in the late teenage years. Over the course of the meetings an alternative theme began to emerge in the form of the aforementioned 'Generation Y' - young players who now have access to unlimited information on rugby and whose culture and expectations mean that they are prepared to challenge coaches. This sometimes may cause conflict and fall-out, as some coaches may feel uncomfortable with the level of technical challenge from young players. It was also pointed out that fewer teams and a lack of coaches result in larger panels of players for each team, which in turn results in players not getting a game, eventually leading to them moving to other sporting codes or, even worse, ceasing to participate in any sport.

Discussion took place around the inter-relationship between the clubs and the provincial regional squads. It is important to clarify that the role of the club is mainly team development while the role of the regional squads is to develop individual players. While clubs understand the requirement for these squads to assist in screening players and progressing skill development, they also create issues. The first is that clubs are reluctant to put players forward as there is a perception that competing clubs use these sessions as opportunities to recruit players. The second is some players are difficult to manage once they return from regional squads as they 'get the notion' that they are going to be professional players.

Clubs have to accept that their talented players will gravitate towards clubs competing at the highest level; we cannot deny a player the opportunity to play at the highest level available to them. What is of concern is when financial inducements or false promises are used to draw a player to a club, and it doesn't result in them playing at a higher level of rugby (this issue is expanded upon in the next section). Some clubs had a simple solution to retaining players – ensure that their best coaches are used in the 16-19 age band. The view was expressed that a good coaching environment will retain players (and is used to recruit players as players tell their friends etc etc...).

The youth game has evolved significantly over the last 20 years, and the Youth administrators and conveners need to be thanked for their tireless work. One of the concerns raised through the meetings is that the present structure of the youth season lacks the frequency and intensity of games required for player development. Annually a situation develops leading up to the formation of the U18 National Club Team (in February) where there are a number of players who lack the required match preparation. The club game is very important to the future success of Ireland and it is important to note that the IRFU recognises that any player identified as part of the elite process remains a club player until they receive an academy contract (i.e. U20). It is important that administrators in the youth game continue to develop and to evolve the youth system to ensure that it plays its part in the success of Irish Rugby.



In some meetings discussion arose on the role of sport in developing youth players, especially in terms of values. Naturally, the discussions turned to the schools' ethos as to whether it was about using sport as the means of developing a young person, or about winning? The panelling of players by schools means that many boys did not appear to be getting matches in schools' rugby but at the same time were being denied the opportunity to play youth rugby in clubs.

In other field sports, students can play for both club and school. This said, the IRFU respects the schools' perspective on the role of rugby in the development of young people. However, we need to ensure that all players have the opportunity to play rugby either at school, and if that is not possible, then at the club. In some meetings this was raised as a serious issue, and the IRFU will support the Branch Age Grade Committees in reaching a resolution and allowing young players to play the game. The issue of clubs seeking only the Senior Cup players is outlined in the next section.

In the future there needs to be a closer working relationship between clubs and schools. The impact of the Croke Park Agreement may reduce the ability of teachers to service rugby. Some clubs have already noticed this, and reported increased demand on club coaching resources, which is placing considerable pressure on them. The IRFU has also recognised this and is working with the appropriate government departments to seek solutions.



ADULT RUGBY



Key points:

- Reinstating the club traditions and ethos of the past to protect the values of Irish Rugby.
- Erosion of social rugby and emergence of alternative game options.
- Financial inducements are affecting club loyalty and deterring club volunteers.
- Lost opportunity through schools rugby not being aligned to club rugby.
- Age Grade bands are not effective in facilitating the transfer of players to the Adult Game.
- The prohibitive cost of insurance.

THIS SEASON, due to a combination of factors, there are 48 fewer adult teams in comparison to last season. While it could be suggested that emigration is having an impact on the number of players, it is evident that there are also a number of barriers preventing youth players from making the transition into the adult game. Five key issues were identified from the meetings which require further debate.

i. What is the role of a club?

This is a fundamental question. The consensus was that a club's primary purpose is to provide an environment for players to play and have a lifelong involvement in the game. Are clubs too elitist and focused on winning leagues and cups? Repeatedly we heard that the most vibrant areas of the club are the J3s and below and the women's teams. They tog out, have fun playing the game, pay their subs, spend money in the bar and are the first to help out when required. That said, many club committees leave these lower teams to their own devices, and allocate the majority of resources to their first teams instead, thus undermining the traditional values of club rugby.

The playing of the game is populated mainly by men aged 15-24. The numbers involved in playing falls away sharply after that age – especially when compared with other field sports where playing continues well into the late twenties and thirties. Lifestyles have changed over the last 10 years and the availability of the player, be it male or female, has significantly diminished. In 2010 the IRFU undertook a survey of players and the respondents overall supported playing mid week and night games; there was also a desire to play between 23-25 quality games per year. Simply we have to understand the needs of our players and make the game more accessible!

The IRFU also operates a TAG programme with 26 clubs. This derivative of rugby is growing in popularity with many clubs operating their own TAG competitions outside that of the IRFU. The IRFU recently surveyed the participants and the three main reasons for participating were: keeping fit, it's fun, and it's convenient. Aren't these the same reasons why people played rugby in the first place??

League structures and regulations have to be more accommodating to the social player with regard to time commitment and travel. At a couple of meetings junior clubs indicated that they had attracted senior club players because these players no longer had the time to spend each weekend travelling the country to play rugby. To make the game more convenient, many clubs have responded by playing evening games under lights and have discovered that it also attracts spectators! Consideration should be given to promoting versions of the game other than 15-a-side rugby which might help extend the length of the playing career of the school or club player.

*“...90% of the club's volunteer and financial resources are focussed on the 1st XV...couldn't these be better used in other areas of the club?”
(Leinster Club)*

ii. Financial inducements

We need only review the record of player transfers to see that a significant level of ‘club hopping’ now occurs within the game. At each meeting there was a level of honesty within the discussion about the financial inducements which lie behind this trend, whether on or off the club books, and their impact on the game. While clubs have indicated that there has been a decrease in the incidence of financial inducements as a result of economic conditions, they do continue to have a negative impact on the culture of club rugby.

During the meetings a number of clubs gave their story of how they had aspired to progress to more senior leagues by offering financial inducements to players which in the longer term the club could not afford and the resulting negative impact this policy had on players, committees and volunteers alike. In the end these clubs found that their best interests were served by reverting to the ethos of a community-based rugby club which was run, managed and supported by volunteers.

For a small group of established clubs, those who have built a strong support base and excellent club facilities, financial inducements are not viewed as a drain on resources. Overall, however, there was a desire expressed to remove financial inducements from the game. This would be nigh-on impossible for the IRFU to police. Any solution must ultimately be owned by the clubs and during the meetings clubs offered a range of possible ways forward:

- Club charter or modification of club constitutions to reflect that financial inducements should not influence the outcome of a competition.
- Reduce the maximum amount that clubs can pay to players and police the regulation more effectively.
- Establish a policy which sets out what expenses can be paid for (taking into consideration travel in rural areas).
- Review the role of foreign players in club competitions.
- Review the transfer regulations for age grade players to ensure that players move for the right reasons and not due to financial inducements.
- While promotion between leagues should be based primarily on merit, there should also be a minimum standard requirement for each league with regard to club and/or rugby development, to ensure that all aspects of the club reflect the league that the team is playing in.

The IRFU needs to work with the schools to re-educate players, especially school leavers on the principles of amaturism. When the same topic was discussed at meetings where University clubs were present an explanation was provided of the education awards, which are small and fall within the current IRFU regulations. While some clubs believe that University clubs have an unfair advantage as they offer academic opportunities as an inducement to players, in reality the reward is minimal.

The IRFU has already implemented the **Fair Play Working Party**, which is tasked to investigate the financial cost of club rugby and impact of financial inducements in the game. This working party will engage with Branches and clubs to consult on the matter. It is important that clubs fully participate in the review, and that they acknowledge the role they must have in developing and implementing a solution.



“As soon as we commenced paying players, our adult teams decreased from 7 to 4 over 3 years – we wish we had never started paying...”
(Ulster Club)

“...We had aspirations of being a Senior Club, and the strategy was to pay players for the first few years to get there; the problem was, once we reached our goal, the rot had set in...”
(Senior Club)



“...it takes six months to re-educate a schools player for club rugby. Remember, this is the first time they would have been asked to fill out a form and pay a sub to participate in sport...”
(Leinster Club)

“...The first question when recruiting school players is “what is the package”? The culture of payment commences way before they reach the club...”
(Leinster Club)

iii. Reaping a better harvest from Schools' Rugby

Across the 78 “non-exempted” schools there are more teams than there are Adult teams in Ireland. In total, these 78 schools play over 12,000 games per season. Some of these boys would have started their rugby in clubs and then progressed from the club to the school, but many others will have started playing in school. The stark fact is that, while there are no accurate figures, it is estimated that less than 20% of schools players continue to play the game after they leave school. The IRFU will be undertaking a similar exercise with schools towards the end of 2012.

Generally, the club perspective was that many schools place too much emphasis on trying to create ‘professional schools players’. There is undoubtedly a role for competition in the development of a young man but it needs to be questioned whether the present intensity of and investment into school rugby leads to player burnout and creates an unrealistic expectation of being a professional in a young player’s mind? The suggestion is that it creates a difficult transition from school rugby to club rugby and many players (potential professionals and good club players) have been lost to the game as they cannot adapt from the structured school environment to the self-driven club environment.

However, clubs also need to review how they engage with schools. Clubs acknowledged that they spend the majority of time chasing the best players from the school teams. This is often achieved through inducements, and thus the culture of financial reward is bred into a schools player early. Anecdotally, one only needs to monitor Facebook at the end of the school cup season to see the exchanges between players detailing the inducements that clubs are offering them. For players who are not offered such payments, there is a negative perception created that they are not good enough to play club rugby – and so they may leave the game. The clubs again reflected on yesteryear’s way of doing things – but the practice of clubs recruiting players from outside the school’s Senior Cup Team for their lower teams has diminished. These have traditionally been the players who play club rugby for the love of it, and later become the passionate club members and future leaders of our game. **In order to recapture some of that benefit, there is a requirement for clubs to reconsider their purpose and their recruitment procedures.**

iv. Age Grade Rugby into the Adult game

Significant debate occurred within the meetings on the transition from Age Grade rugby into the adult game. Three years ago, following extensive consultation, the IRFU changed the date of eligibility to 1st January, with age bands at U13, U15, U17, U19 and U21. However, the general perspective was that the maintenance of age bands up to U21 is not facilitating the transfer of players into the adult game, and there was overall consensus that U19/20s should be the oldest age band. Furthermore, in some clubs the U21s had become more important than the second team, resulting in issues arising at the end of a player’s career in Age Grade rugby when they found themselves an ‘average player’ in the adult competition.

Each province had a different perspective. Ulster clubs were very supportive of the U19 team being operated as part of a ‘derby day’ with the senior adult team, as this had resulted in an excellent transfer of players into the adult game. Leinster clubs expressed a desire to return to the old McCorry Cup format of U19s (as at 1st July) in the first half of the season, after which the players are then filtered into the adult teams in the second half of

the season. From a Munster and Connacht perspective, the U21 age band is not working as the impact of emigration means that U21 players are pulled into the adult teams earlier. University clubs also recognised the shortcomings of the U21 age band as it can result in a player never playing adult rugby whilst at university which then limits their loyalty to the club upon completion of their studies.

The issue of the over-recruitment of Age Grade players by some Senior and Qualifying clubs was also raised. Players will naturally have aspirations to advance their playing career and a club will not want to stand in the way of a player who wishes to play rugby at the highest level. However, some clubs create an extended panel of young players who will never play 1st XV rugby and who end up being used to hold up tackle bags. These players are often too embarrassed to return to their old club (or are not released to return) and in the end often leave the sport for another sporting code or stop playing sport altogether. This issue needs to be reviewed: it is important that a player moves for the right opportunity and should the move not be successful that he/she returns to their home club with the minimum of fuss.

ULSTER BANK LEAGUE

At each meeting there was a discussion on the Ulster Bank League. Overall there was a desire to retain the Ulster Bank League; however, concerns were raised over increasing travel costs and player fatigue due to the number of fixtures, especially in Division 1. Caution was also raised that the 2011/12 season had operated smoothly as there has been no adverse weather to date – but this might not always be the case. When the IRFU reviewed the Ulster Bank League in May 2010, it was agreed that the new structure would operate for five seasons. However, given the current economic uncertainty, the IRFU will undertake a further review in consultation with clubs during the 2012/13 season to assess the impact of the new structure and make any necessary changes to ensure the survival of the Ulster Bank League.

v. Prohibitive cost of insurance

Team insurance was a topic of debate, especially with Junior clubs. The present cost of insuring a team is €2,376 (£1,800), and this only covers the player in the event of catastrophic injury. The reason for the high insurance cost is the high number of catastrophic injuries; there are 33 seriously injured players currently supported by the IRFU Charitable Trust. During the discussions comparisons were drawn to other sports which have a self-insuring programme which covers all medical costs. The IRFU does have a top-up scheme; however, this is not seen as user-friendly. Clubs have also reported that there is an increasing number of players who are self-employed or contractors who cannot risk playing rugby in case they are injured and unable to work. The high cost of insurance makes clubs reluctant to field an additional team for fear of the team folding while the insurance premiums remain in place. This is especially prevalent in areas of high emigration, where clubs are unsure who intends to remain in the community and will be available to play. The IRFU has given a commitment to review insurance before the end of the season and a review group has been established to find a solution to this barrier to participation.



WOMEN'S RUGBY



Key points:

- Women's Youth rugby is growing and is an opportunity to secure greater buy-in from club.
- Clubs with Women's teams praise their passion and can-do attitude.
- The majority of clubs acknowledge that women's rugby injects new volunteers and enthusiasm into clubs.
- The main challenge is the small player base and the need to cater equally for aspiring and social players.

SINCE the integration of the women's game into the IRFU in 2008, the primary objective has been to change perceptions and attitudes towards women's rugby. One of the surprises of these meetings was the positive response of clubs who have endorsed women's rugby, acknowledging that the women's game brings a new vitality and energy to their clubs. Unfortunately there are still the doubters and, while they may be in the minority, it is regrettable if they fail to recognise the valuable contribution that women's rugby can make to a club e.g. the opportunity for future volunteers and enhancement of the club social environment.

Overall the numbers in the women's game are extremely small, with approximately 1,300 adult players and 5,000 Age Grade players. However, there is the opportunity for growth, especially through the introduction of 7s. Clubs reported that there is a group of players who wish to play competitive rugby and a considerable gap between them and those who wish to tog out to play a social form of rugby. The challenge is to cater for both groups equally from within the small numbers of women presently playing. Clubs with All Ireland teams indicated that the league struggles to provide a consistent, high-quality game for the players. They also questioned whether there are sufficient players of the appropriate standard to support 25 teams playing an all-Ireland league competition. The competition structure is currently being reviewed with recommendations due to be tabled at the end of the 2011/12 season.

At youth level, the small-sided game programme linked to 'Play Rugby' has been a success with an increased number of young females playing the game. Those clubs who run the programme indicated that there has been a significant increase in numbers; one club indicated that it had been such a huge success that they now have more female players than male Age Grade players. To date the IRFU has not provided guidance notes to clubs on girls' involvement in Mini Rugby. However, many clubs have reported that the separation of Mini Rugby into boys and girls teams results in more girls playing the game. The IRFU recommends that clubs operate segregated mini-rugby to encourage the participation of girls

The youth game is seen as an important tool in getting the women's game embedded into the club. One of the key issues with the adult women's game is that it can be transient and can disappear within a couple of weeks if not correctly supported by the club. By contrast, a youth team has a level of dependency on the club, thus becoming very much part of it. Experience has shown that if women's rugby can establish a foothold in the club as a youth team that there is then a much greater chance of it being supported and of its survival as an Adult team.

"...Our women's teams remind us of our senior men's teams of the past in that they appreciate everything that is done for them..."
(Munster Club)

THE CLUB – OTHER ISSUES

Key points:

- Clubs need to ensure that they have good governance structures and cohesion between mini-youth-adult rugby sections.
- Clubs to focus on Referee recruitment to supply the demand for matches.
- Enhancement of club facilities to recruit and retain players.
- Challenge to IRFU and Branches to capitalise on the success of Irish rugby and ensure that the clubs can also benefit from the increased number of passive supporters.

PREVIOUSLY in this report it was outlined why good governance and internal cohesion was necessary to achieve a sustainable and successful club. The IRFU has already launched the Club Excellence Award, which is a template for clubs who aspire to good structures on and off the pitch.

There are a number of other challenges facing clubs in the coming years which were highlighted during the meetings. One of these was referenced earlier in this report: the recruitment of referees. Clubs stated that this was a challenge and it is difficult to persuade club members and players to put themselves forward for the role. Referees are an essential part of the game and there is a requirement for clubs to fulfil their responsibility to actively promote this aspect of rugby football. As the vast majority of our referees are volunteers, it is imperative that we make the values of rugby explicit to ensure that referees feel valued and continue to contribute to a quality game.

While the most important asset of any club is their people, a key secondary is the standard of its facilities. Some clubs during the meetings were quite frank in questioning the wisdom of diverting club resources into on-pitch performance when it would have been better to invest in facilities, a lack of which is now presenting a barrier to the growth of the game. Floodlights and unisex changing rooms emerged as the key requirements, with many rural clubs also requiring additional training pitches to accommodate under-age players. The IRFU would welcome the Irish Government's reactivation of the Capital Sports Grants to facilitate the development of our club grounds.

Clubs also felt that they were a victim of Ireland's success in the professional game. There is now a population of rugby supporters who are entirely aligned to Provincial Teams and the National Team, and have no involvement in club rugby. During the meetings Clubs challenged the Branches as to whether initiatives could be undertaken to link these new fans to clubs. However, it should be acknowledged that this is already happening: some of our youth clubs have been formed by members of Provincial Supporter Clubs who want their children to have the opportunity to play rugby. The challenge is for other clubs to make the connection with these supporters as early as possible – as they would with a player – so that they develop an affinity with the club as well as with the Province.

A minority of clubs have begun to open their grounds to "Young Adults with Disability", who with supervision play a form of TAG Rugby. Clubs reported that this was a worthwhile outreach venture which assisted in creating a community spirit within the club. This new population creates a number of new challenges for clubs, and there is a requirement for the IRFU/Branches to provide guidance on catering to this new population of players.



"...walk up to a Leinster supporter at a game and ask them what club they are from, and they will look at you as though you have two heads and say 'Leinster' ..."
(Leinster Club)

THE IRFU, AND WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT FROM THE EXERCISE

THIS is the first time that the IRFU and Branches has undertaken an exercise on this scale, and it was extremely useful. The knowledge acquired by the IRFU through this process can be highlighted as follows:

i. Role of the IRFU and Branches

The IRFU governance model is Union – Branch – Club/School. This was the foundation that the IRFU was built on, and it is likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future. Within this model the IRFU does not have a direct relationship with the clubs, as clubs are constituents of the Branches. The only clubs who communicate regularly with the IRFU are senior and junior clubs participating in the All Ireland League and Bateman & Junior Cups. Therefore the IRFU is accustomed to communicating with a majority of clubs through the Branches. **A concern expressed within the meetings is the perception that information is not cascading from the IRFU through the Branches to the clubs.** Furthermore, usually the only time that a club receives any communication from the IRFU is when a directive is issued – thus it creates the perception that the IRFU is ‘Big Brother’.

It was also evident that the IRFU needs to spend more time in communicating how it leads and financially supports national and provincial rugby. The professional game is the revenue generator for Irish Rugby and enables us to support the whole game. Greater transparency in our communication and decision making process will allow all stakeholders to embrace changes which may be required in order to safeguard the Union’s ability to support all areas of the game.

From time to time we hear comments such as ‘that is a Branch matter’ or ‘that is for the IRFU to sort out’. While empowerment and diversity are important we need to accept that, occasionally, issues arise which are not just the preserve of a school, or a club, or a Branch. They may be issues which affect Irish Rugby generally and the best chance of reaching a solution is by working together for the greater good of Irish Rugby.

With the success of provincial rugby, there has been an increase in the profile of the provincial brands. Seven years ago all development staff were IRFU-branded. Since then, in order to leverage the success of the Provincial brands and to facilitate local decision-making, the IRFU has empowered the Branches, specifically through the investment of €3.25M per annum (of total domestic game budget of €9M) to allow the Branches to undertake coach and community development on the IRFU’s behalf. One outcome of this move is that the clubs are now only seeing provincial brands on development officers’ tracksuits, notwithstanding the fact that the majority of these posts are funded by the IRFU. There is a perception that the IRFU doesn’t support or care about club rugby. The reality is that the IRFU does care and wants to continue supporting the club game.

The meetings also highlighted a number of issues with regard to governance, especially the suggestion that clubs’ representatives on the Branch do not necessarily reflect the actual position of the clubs on various matters. Raising this issue was helpful as the presence of both proactive club representatives and their Branch representatives at the table enabled all parties to talk things through. The IRFU perspective is that the onus is on the club to ensure they appoint to



the Branch an appropriate individual with an all- round knowledge of the game thus ensuring that the club's needs are accurately represented and that there is effective communication from the Branch to the club.

ii. Communication and information flow

As outlined above, the IRFU to date has relied primarily on its standard governance model (Union – Branch – Club/School) to communicate. The feedback from the meetings is that this is not an effective communication system. In debriefing the club engagement meetings, we listed the key priorities of the clubs, and then listed where they ranked in the IRFU priorities. There was a distinct lack of correlation. The learning for the IRFU is that we don't spend enough time preparing and planning communication of information which is important to clubs (e.g., on tickets). During the meetings it became obvious that key information between IRFU – Branch – club, which would allow clubs to make timely and informed decisions, was not communicated.

Furthermore, the IRFU and staff have to acknowledge that they are communicating to volunteers who have other commitments. With the professionalisation of the game and the employment of full-time development officers, there is a significant volume of correspondence sent out to which the IRFU/Branch often require an immediate response. It is recognized that administrators are not always certain as to who is the 'listening ear' in the clubs with the result that the IRFU/Branches often adopt a scattergun approach by firing information out across all areas of a club in an attempt to ensure that someone takes notice. What is evident is that all parties, the IRFU, Branch and club must play an active part in communication.

To address this issue the IRFU has convened a communications group to review and manage ongoing communication with our Branches and stakeholders. The object will be to implement a communication programme which ensures that information is disseminated to the correct segments of the game, using the most appropriate medium. The IRFU will be working with the Branches over the coming weeks to look at the flow of communication to ensure that Branches and clubs receive the correct information.

iii. Exploiting the popularity of the game

The message is clear from both clubs and the **Vision 2020** research that rugby is becoming more popular due to a combination of success, credibility and profile. In some provinces the clubs praised the Branches for initiatives that engaged the provincial professional game with clubs - i.e. player appearance or open training days. Are there greater opportunities for these professional players to re-invest in the game which has given them a high profile profession? If players were to give 1 hour a fortnight, throughout our season, supporting development officers in delivering Player, coach, women's and referee's development, it would be a huge promotional tool for the IRFU and the four provinces in building a positive relationship with the clubs and schools.

The Vision 2020 research indicated that rugby's primary barriers to participation are not based on attitudes to the game but largely on accessibility and finding out about the game. There is a very good opportunity to widen the base of rugby beyond its traditional areas. We shouldn't assume that every person who walks into a club comes from a rugby background or knows how to play. The challenge for the IRFU, Branches and clubs is to convert 'passive involvement' into 'active participation'. This requires thought and development in order to create an environment which permits easy access to the game and allows clubs to become more ingrained in the local community.



".....all the club emails come into the club computer. I go to the club twice a week to check emails, and often the Branch wants a response before I have checked the emails ..."
(Junior Club)

IRFU Clubhouse is the club centric database system developed by the IRFU and designed to assist clubs in managing players, members and squads. The system will be launched in the coming months, and is designed to ease the volunteer burden in running a club.

The IRFU has already commenced work in this area through the Welcoming Clubs Programme, which aims to support clubs in attracting new members. The initiative also encourages clubs to share information and learn from each other. Since the inception of the Welcoming Clubs programme in October 2011, 71 clubs are participating in the programme and receive ongoing support through fact sheets and access to a social media information sharing area.

However, the IRFU and Branches will have to do more to ensure that passive supporters become active supporters and clubs become more welcoming of such people. The challenge for Irish Rugby is how to channel this increased public support into developing the sport domestically.

iv. Making our culture and values explicit

Over the last five years the game has grown exponentially. As we have discovered, rugby is appealing to a new, non-traditional population, mostly due to the values of the game. Parents in particular see rugby as a sport which reflects the values that they would wish their children to have: *integrity, respect and discipline*⁵. However, these values remain implicit within the game, and it is generally accepted that our players and supporters will live up to them.

There is a requirement for the IRFU and all stakeholders of the game not only to live up to these values, but to ensure that they are explicitly known and embraced by all those who participate either as a player, coach, volunteer, administrator or spectator. It is important to protect the values, traditions and ethos of the game which the rugby fraternity has worked for so long to uphold.

v. Engaging with clubs going forward

An exercise of this nature only has an impact when conducted infrequently. However, it did identify that there is a requirement for the IRFU and Branches to find ways of engaging more frequently with clubs. In this process it is important that the IRFU and Branches understand their different roles in communicating with clubs and schools. Therefore, while this initiative will occur again in three seasons time, in the short term the IRFU in conjunction with the Branches will convene rugby sector-specific meetings on a regular basis.

There were a number of local positives from the meetings. Often clubs meet on a regional basis only to argue over leagues or player transfers. For many clubs this was a fresh and welcome opportunity to meet under less contentious circumstances and to discuss and possibly collaborate in developing the local game. Following on from the meetings some regions have convened groups which are continuing the discussions initiated by them.

The reason that Irish rugby is in a good place is that our game is built on the principle that all clubs and schools share in the success of the game and that we continue to have many committed club administrators and coaches. What became most evident from the meetings is that we are a 'people business'. In response to this, there is a requirement for the IRFU to regularly engage with these same people.

**...We had a new boy in U10s mini-rugby who was upset at the side of the pitch because he didn't know how to tackle. We should never take it for granted that everyone has grown up with the game...
(Leinster Club)**

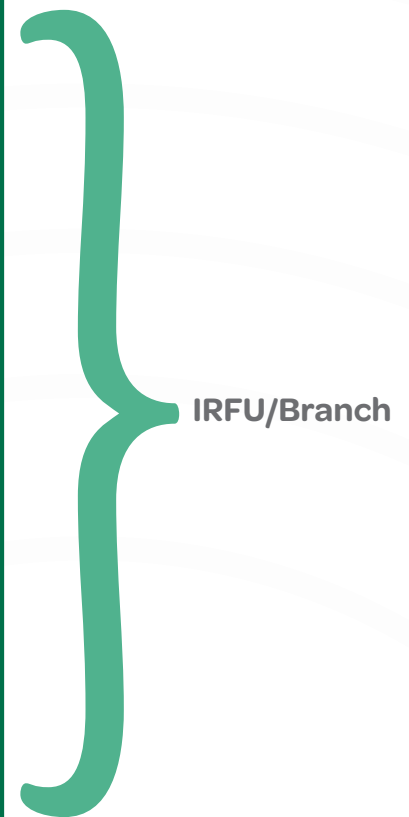
**...the Welcoming Clubs Programme made us refocus where our volunteer effort was focussed... We are good at reaching out to our existing players, but need to focus on attracting the wider community to our family!...
(Munster Club)**

ACTIONS – THE NEXT STEPS

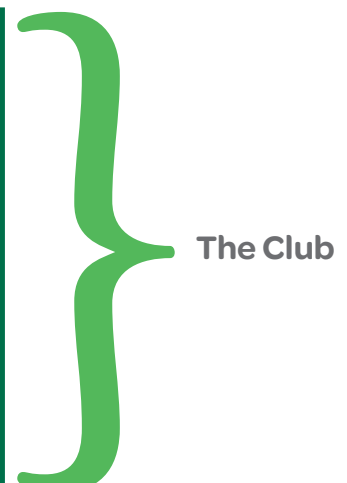
THE table below outlines the actions collated from the meetings and report. Obviously not all these actions can be achieved overnight and neither are there the resources to achieve them all. As indicated, there needs to be discussion and debate at all levels of the game to prioritise key area's for inclusion in the strategic plan.

Issue identified	Action
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Ensuring that the values and ethos of rugby are explicit	<p>Through the strategic planning process the role, purpose and the values of Irish Rugby need to be articulated and a promotional campaign put into place.</p> <p>Branches to work with Clubs to implement parent awareness programme on rugby and Long Term Player Development (LTPD).</p>
Leadership of the Game	<p>IRFU to implement leadership programme to develop the future volunteer leaders of the Game.</p> <p>The IRFU and Branch to review the role of the delegate to the Branch and also the delegate to the IRFU.</p> <p>IRFU to engage more regularly with Clubs to understand their issues and reinforce their contribution to the success of Irish Rugby. The Club Engagement meetings are planned to occur again 2014/15 season.</p>
Enhanced Communication between IRFU/ Branch/Club	<p>IRFU has already established a working party to review the two way communication between Clubs, Branches and IRFU. A report will be published in May 2012.</p> <p>IRFU Clubhouse (Club Database System) will be fully operational in time for 2012/13 season which has a communication functionality (including social media).</p>
Sharing the sporting landscape	<p>IRFU to maintain open lines of communication with other sporting codes.</p> <p>Branches convene regional meeting of clubs with an agenda of developing the sport.</p>



Play the Game	<p>Branches to review existing regulations and competition structures to ensure that all players get the opportunity to play a form of the game (i.e. reduced sides).</p> <p>Branches to promote to clubs the benefit of social rugby.</p>
Increase the accessibility of the game	<p>IRFU has launched the Welcoming Clubs Programme; designed to assist clubs in promoting the game locally and attracting new members.</p> <p>Branches (supported by the IRFU) will run Provincial Welcoming Clubs Workshops in May 2012, to assist clubs with the planning of recruitment programmes for 2012/13 season.</p> <p>Through the Welcoming Clubs Programme, specific programmes will be implemented to encourage more mothers (& Females) to become involved in the operation of the Clubs.</p>



The Club



Issue identified	Action
<p>Enhancing facilities and supporting new clubs</p>	<p>IRFU to review all club development kits and tools .</p> <p>Branches (with support of IRFU) to review club loan programme and provide guidance notes on accessing resources/funding through government schemes .</p> <p>IRFU to develop a ‘starter’ pack for communities who wish to establish a rugby club.</p>
<p>Finding the new Generation of volunteers</p>	<p>IRFU to develop a volunteer strategy which implements a range of programmes to recruit, manage and retain volunteers</p> <p>Branches to review competition structures to maximise participation and encourage social leagues (to maintain player’s connection with club)</p> <p>Promote the Club Excellence Award and provide an award system for clubs to achieve the standard</p>
<p>Increasing the number of Referees</p>	<p>Clubs to promote and recruit referees, and re-enforcing the positive role of the voluntary referee.</p> <p>IRFU currently reviewing the Associate Referee Programme, with the intention of a re-launch in 2012/13 season.</p> <p>Branches to review their engagement and management of their Associate referees with the intention of maximising retention.</p>
<p>Team Insurance</p>	<p>The IRFU is committed to reviewing the present insurance programme – but as there is a finite budget there will be a requirement to divert resources to support any recommendation.</p>
<p>Cost of club rugby and impact of Financial inducements</p>	<p>The IRFU has convened the Fair Play Working Party to review and make recommendations. Branches have been tasked to consult with clubs on the matter – any solution must be owned by the clubs.</p> <p>IRFU Schools Committee to develop a promotion programme to educate players on the ‘amateur’ status of rugby.</p>
<p>Enhancing the All Ireland League</p>	<p>In 2012/13, the IRFU will engage with Branch and Clubs to assess the impact of the recent changes to the Ulster Bank All Ireland League.</p>

Age Grade



<p>Maximising the transition to the Adult game</p>	<p>Branches have commenced reviewing the current Age Bands; recommendations to be implemented by end of 2011/12 season</p> <p>Branches to review competition structures to maximise participation and encourage social leagues</p> <p>Branches to review Age Grade and Adult Competition regulations in regards to transfer of players to achieve the following outcomes;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure players transfer for the right reasons / Right of ‘return’ should the young player’s new club not work out. ■ Remove any barrier to clubs nominating players for regional squads (manage the fear of player poaching). ■ Devalue player incentives for transferring .
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Issue identified	Action
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Increasing the transition between school and Clubs	<p>IRFU Schools Committee to review competition structure with the aim of alignment to LTPD.</p> <p>IRFU and Age Grade committees to conduct a survey of School leavers to access the main reason for player drop out.</p> <p>Branches to work with clubs to promote the recruitment of players for social rugby.</p> <p>Clubs to appoint volunteer recruitment officers whose primary role is to target all school leavers.</p>
Increasing the quality of Youth game at higher age bands	<p>IRFU to review player recognition programme to increase emphasis on the development of players at Stage 3 of the Long Term Player Development pathway.</p> <p>Branches to review Youth competition structure to ensure consistent competition structure</p> <p>Clubs to review appointment of coaches at higher age bands of youth rugby</p>
Young Adults with Disability	IRFU/Branches to develop policies/recommendations on the participation.

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Age Grade

Promotion of the Women's Game	<p>Branches (supported by IRFU) to run a series of workshops with clubs in August to educate them on developing and managing women's teams.</p> <p>IRFU/Branches to monitor allocation of Club Community Rugby Officers' time to development of Women's Rugby.</p>
Sustainable Women's Competition Structure	<p>The IRFU has convened a Working Party to review the competition structures from Development Leagues up to the All Ireland League. Recommendations in April 2012.</p> <p>The IRFU and Branches to run Women's coaching courses to increase and improve coaching in the women's game.</p>

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Women's Game

Increase number of coaches with non-rugby background	<p>IRFU to work with the Branches to review all coaching materials.</p> <p>IRFU to develop an 'Introduction to Rugby course'. Course to orientate new coaches/parents to the game – Branches to implement the course .</p>
Payment of Coaches	IRFU to produce guidelines for clubs on the recruitment and management of club coaches.

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Coaching



IRFU

IRISH RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION 2012