

WOMEN IN RUGBY

ACTION PLAN REVIEW





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CONTENTS

1. Introduction	06
2. Methodology	10
3. Outcomes from the Review and Recommendations	14
4. Conclusions	45

APPENDICES

Resource Implications	46
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John Robinson,
President



Kevin Potts,
Chief Executive

FOREWORD

This report, which is the culmination of many months of hard work, research and debate across a major cross section of individuals key to the development of Women's Rugby in Ireland, reflects the ambition of the Irish Rugby Football Union for Women's Rugby on this island over the coming 5 years and beyond. The vision for Irish Rugby, as set out in the IRFU's Strategic Plan 2018 – 2023, is based on 'Building success together'. This report is an important stepping-stone in our collective approach of working together to significantly increase the playing base, enjoyment and competitiveness of Women's Rugby in Ireland.

Amanda Bennett of FairPlay Ltd independently held almost 80 interviews with key stakeholders across the game; Opinions Market Research independently conducted a survey with almost nine-hundred respondents from across the game. Finally, building on Amanda's work, a Women in Rugby Steering Group engaged in lengthy discussions about the best way forward for Women in Rugby in Ireland and their recommendations are the cornerstone of this report.

The Steering Group was very clear; this is not a report on Women's Rugby; this is a report on Women in Rugby and the steps we can take to make Irish Rugby a welcoming and inclusive environment for women, whether as players, coaches, referees, or volunteers.

We particularly want to ensure that every girl who wishes to play rugby in Ireland has the opportunity to do so through the provision of participation and competition pathways allowing them to achieve their ambitions, reach their full potential and aspire to wear the green jersey. Aligned with this is the IRFU's aspiration to compete at the highest levels in both Sevens and 15s internationally.

The recommendations set out in this report will go some way to achieving these ambitions.

While we understand that all recommendations in this report may not be universally agreed upon, they are the outcome of extensive independent research, review and engagement across a broad cross section of stakeholders in Irish Rugby and, as such, reflect what we believe to be in the best interests of the whole of Irish Rugby at this time.

In terms of committee representation, under the 2018 - 2023 Women in Rugby Action plan, we had an objective of achieving a minimum of 20% female delegates on the IRFU Union Committee by July of next year and we remain on track to exceed that commitment. The Government has subsequently set a revised target of 40% for female representation on sports boards by the end of 2023. We are engaging with Sport Ireland on our approach to reaching that target and in what time frame.

The financial investment required to allow us to achieve our ambition, as detailed in this report, is significant – an additional €2.4m per year, on top of the current annual investment of €5.5m for the Women's game. This funding is not currently budgeted for, but we are committed to starting this journey and, indeed, we already have. We will also engage with Sport Ireland and others, to seek external investment and support.

The recommendations and indicative timelines outlined in this report will form the basis for the new Women in Rugby Strategic Plan 2023-2028 which is currently in progress and will be published in 2023 as part of the updated Irish Rugby Strategic Plan.

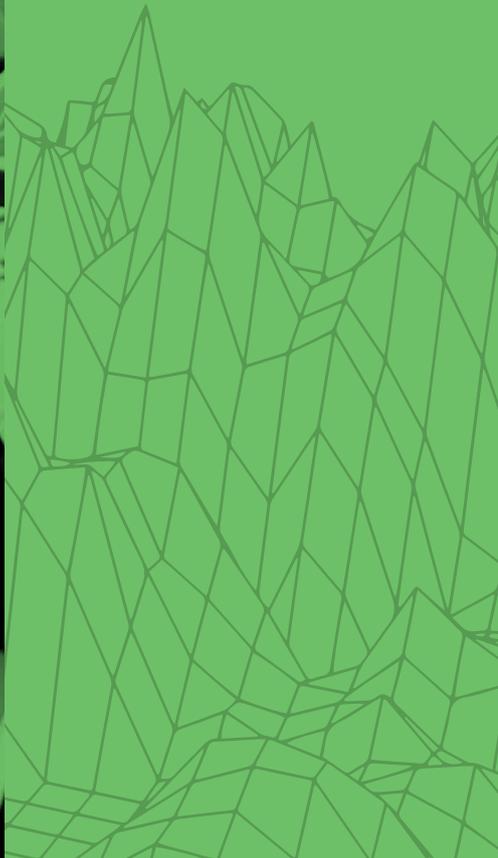
We would like to thank all those who contributed to the review and this report, especially Amanda Bennett for her tireless commitment, and we look forward to working with all stakeholders to implement its recommendations. This is a long term project. The work has already started.





1.0

INTRODUCTION





In 2021 the IRFU commissioned a review of its Women in Rugby Action Plan 2018-23 to better understand what progress had been made and to consider how to address any areas that had not, to date, met projected goals.

The Terms of Reference were updated in 2022 and focused on five areas:

- How the Domestic Game and High-Performance pathways become aligned to achieve agreed development and performance objectives, including significantly increasing the size of the talent pool by creating easier access to rugby for meaningful periods throughout the year.
- The optimum competition models that best support both participation programmes and high-performance player pathways set out the short, medium, and long-term objectives of Women's Rugby in Ireland as outlined in the existing plan.
- How to best create new competitions that encourage athletes from other sports to play rugby for a meaningful period each year.
- How more women can be attracted to take up leadership positions within the game (off- the pitch e.g., Coaching, Refereeing, Administrative, Governance).
- The optimum future governance and support structures for Women's Rugby in the short and longer terms that ensures confidence, success, and enables agile, efficient, and aligned progress and growth to be achieved across the Women's Game.

Whilst the initial focus of the review was to understand progress against the Women in Rugby Action Plan objectives, the revised Terms of Reference created a broader and more comprehensive review of women in Irish Rugby. This review was conducted independently by Amanda Bennett of FairPlay Ltd, who interviewed approximately 80 stakeholders across players, volunteers, Provincial and IRFU staff, Provincial and IRFU committee members, club representatives and sponsors. The feedback from these interviews and surveys (see Methodology) were provided to the IRFU Steering Group who drafted this report. This report provides an update against some of the key 2023 targets of the initial plan, considers the ways in which women are currently involved in rugby and presents recommendations to enhance the current provision of rugby to women in Ireland, and to create a more inclusive game. The implementation of these recommendations will be subject to funding being made available, and the timelines provided against each recommendation is indicative.

1.1 CONTEXT

During the course of the independent review, the IRFU announced significant investment in the women's performance programme. This included the introduction of contracts for 15s players and the appointment to a newly created Head of Women's Performance and Pathway role. Also, to note, discussions continue around the creation of a Celtic Cup (or similar) that would involve teams from Wales, Scotland and Ireland, though there is no final decision on this as yet. Whilst not in scope for this review, these changes inevitably influence some of the recommendations, in particular the alignment of High Performance and domestic rugby pathways, and competition structures.

The outcomes of the review highlighted a number of opportunities that will enable the IRFU to build on its successes in growing the game for girls and women, and these opportunities are set out in this report.

Also, to be considered are the current risks, including racism, sexism, verbal and physical abuse, facing society and all sports. During the interview stage of this review, it was evident from the experiences of some interviewees that rugby also faces these issues. This report recommends steps that should be taken to mitigate the risk of such situations recurring in rugby, and address in a meaningful manner any such behavioural issues that arise in the sport in the future.

There are many opportunities linked to the growth of women's sport, in particular Women's Rugby. These are not limited to increases in participants or the potential for High Performance success. Recent studies show that the broadcast, brand value and commercial opportunities associated with women's sport are set to grow significantly.

In the UK, the Women's Sport Trusts' 2021 Report Visibility Uncovered projected that the value of women's sport is set to treble to £1bn by 2030. The report urges sports organisations to invest now in order to reap long-term benefits: "If you're standing as an organisation that believes in gender parity, inclusion and diversity, actually some of this is a longer-term play investing in your content around women's sport".

Similarly, The Sports Consultancy report Capitalising On The Rising Tide – Investing In Women's Sport published in 2022 shows that World Rugby, FIFA and UEFA experienced a 146% increase in sponsorship investment in their Women's Games in 2021. Although starting from a low base, these increases suggest that there is global recognition of the potential for increased commercialisation of women's sport.

The IRFU's recent marketing and communications around the women's series in Japan is an excellent example of a co-ordinated and dynamic campaign that can engage and inspire. Integrating women and rugby into all business functions will reap benefits on and off the field.

These represent the principal risks and opportunities facing the IRFU, and the timing of this review means the Union can target its investment to protect the organisation and grow the game.

The recommendations set out in this report are designed to assist in developing the next iteration of the IRFU Women in Rugby Plan, ensuring this is embedded in the organisation's strategic plan with responsibility for the achievement of strategic goals shared by all those involved in the game. It is noted that all recommendations are subject to funding, and the timelines provided in this report are indicative.



2.0

METHODOLOGY



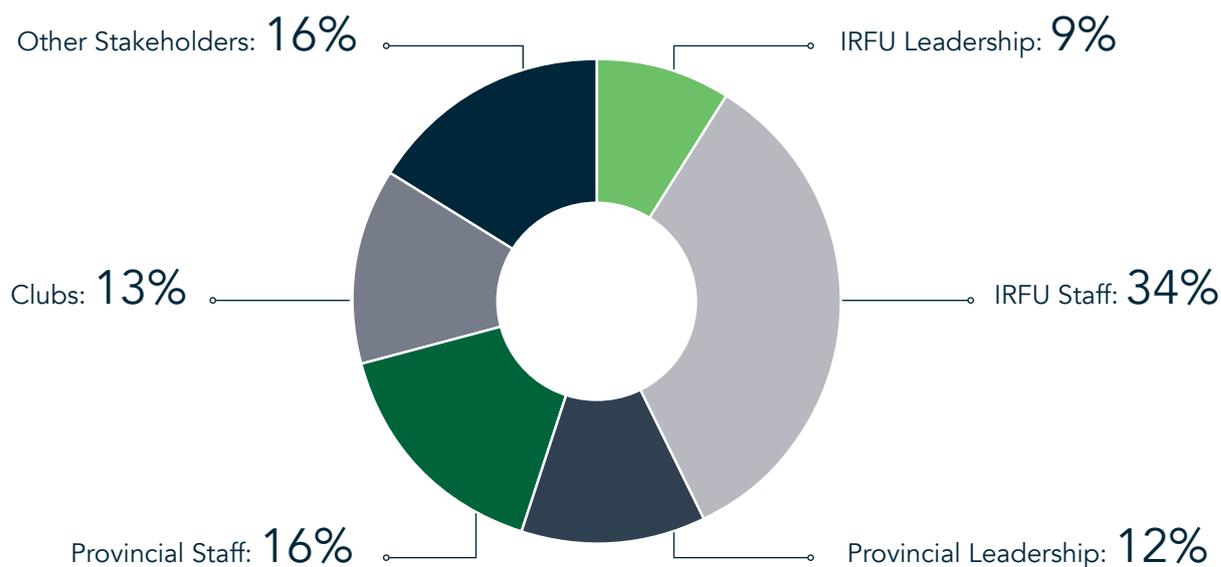
THE REVIEW INVOLVED FOUR DISTINCT PROCESSES:

<p>Document Review</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ IRFU strategies, policies and meeting notes ✓ Terms of Reference ✓ Job descriptions ✓ Progress reports ✓ Season plans ✓ International Benchmarking ✓ Stakeholder and relevant external strategies 	<p>Independently conducted by Amanda Bennett, Fair Play Ltd</p>
<p>Surveys</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Players ✓ Coaches ✓ Referees ✓ Volunteers ✓ Clubs 	<p>Independently Conducted by Opinions Market Research Ltd</p>
<p>Interviews and Discussion Groups</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ IRFU staff and senior leadership ✓ Provincial staff and senior leadership ✓ Clubs ✓ Volunteers ✓ Players ✓ Other Stakeholders 	<p>Independently conducted by Amanda Bennett, Fair Play Ltd</p>
<p>Reporting</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Recommendations and proposals 	<p>Drafted by Amanda Bennett Finalised and agreed by IRFU Steering Group</p>

The survey, which had 886 respondents, was conducted and collated by independent research consultancy, Opinions. There were 77 interviews conducted, in confidence, under the agreement of anonymity, by Amanda Bennett of FairPlay Limited. These involved a broad range of stakeholders in the game, including players, coaches, sponsors, and provincial and IRFU staff and Committee members. The Interviewees and Groups diagram overleaf shows diversity in terms of responsibility, strategic and operational functions, paid and unpaid personnel, and national, Provincial and local focus.



INTERVIEWEES AND GROUPS



To enable input and effective project management, the IRFU established a Project Steering Group to oversee delivery. This group also acted as an important vehicle in creating practical proposals for the more complex areas of the project. The Steering Group was comprised of:

- John Robinson (IRFU President)
- Greg Barrett (Chair of the Rugby Committee)
- Tony O’Beirne (Chair of the National Professional Game Board)
- Fiona Steed (Chair of the Women’s Sub-Committee)
- Su Carty (IRFU World Rugby Representative)
- Kevin Potts (CEO IRFU)
- Jonny Petrie (CEO Ulster Rugby)
- Colin McEntee (Director of Rugby Development)
- David Nucifora (Director of High Performance)

A Project Working Group was formed to enable access to information, resources and people, and to provide operational support to Amanda Bennett.

In reading the recommendations of this report, it is important to note that the implementation of some recommendations will require time and the involvement of stakeholders, for example player pathway provision; whilst others can be actioned in the near future subject to resourcing e.g. the appointment of a Diversity And Inclusion Lead officer. Recognising this, a suggested timeline for implementation is set out against each recommendation though it is recognised that the implementation of any recommendation will be subject to available funding.

Where there are changes to pathway infrastructure, competition models and inclusion policy and practice, these will evolve from 2023 to 2028, which is the provisional timeline for the next Women in Rugby Plan. It is important for the IRFU and its partners to take a strategic approach to women in Irish Rugby, as well as planning the operational elements that will drive positive change.

3.0

OUTCOMES FROM THE REVIEW AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS





3.1 PROGRESS TOWARDS TARGETS

The Covid pandemic had a significant impact on domestic rugby with the suspension of activity and competitions throughout 2020 and 2021 and it was reported to the Women's Advisory Group in 2021 that approximately 18 months of activity had been lost. This undoubtedly affected the ability of the IRFU, Provinces and clubs to deliver and develop the game. Despite the impacts of Covid, girls and women's involvement in rugby appears to be growing and in a further 12 months, targets might still be met.

Areas where there have been significant progress include the number of children discovering rugby through the Aldi Play Rugby programme which, at 47% of all participants, currently exceeds the original target. There are 375 registered teams, and 59% of clubs are offering girls and/or Women's Rugby. Both of these reinforce the demand for rugby amongst girls and women, and also highlight the need to ensure that clubs have the capacity and commitment to retain these players.

There are 923 registered female coaches which is a record number that surpasses the 2023 target of

450 and the IRFU Youth Council is close to gender parity at 44% female. Exceeding all these targets a year in advance is good news, particularly in light of the disruption to community rugby caused by the pandemic.

The total number of players remains below target and we will be looking to 2022-23 registrations and increased impact from club programmes to ensure the number of adult and youth players meets the 5,000 and 6,500 respective targets by the end of the season. In terms of leadership, the IRFU is committed to Irish Rugby becoming more diverse and Inclusion. In this regard an Equality, Diversity and inclusion training programme is being rolled out across the IRFU and has commenced with Senior Management Group at the date of this report. Another area of ongoing focus is how we increase our gender balance across the IRFU, including the Union Committee itself. Under the existing Women in Rugby Action plan, we will have a minimum of 20% female delegates on the Union by July of next year and remain on track to exceed that commitment at 25%.

The Government have recently set a revised target of 40% for female representation on sports boards by the end of 2023. The IRFU will engage with Sport Ireland on how we can reach that target and in what time frame.

Using data from July 2022, the table below shows progress against the original Women in Rugby Action Plan (2018-2023) targets:

Women in Rugby Action Plan 2018-23 Progress Towards Targets

	Area	Position in 2018	2023 Target	Progress July 2022
Participation 	Adult Players	1,341	5,000	3,113
	Youth Players (U14-18)	2,500	6,500	4,863
	Aldi Play Rugby	44% (43,000)	40+%	47% (54,908)
	Canterbury Give It A Try	NA	NA	2,193* (86 Clubs)
	Number of Teams	190	300+	375
	% Clubs Offering Girls and/or Women's Rugby	21%	50%	59%
	Number of Schools	87	200	111
	Clubs with Participation Pathway	22	100	27
People 	Female Coaches	179	450+	923**
	Female Referees	12	80+	25***
Leadership 	IRFU Committee and Management Roles	2%	20%	11%
	National Youth Council Representation	25%	30+%	44%

* Canterbury Give It A Try was not specified in the original Women in Rugby Action Plan, but it was reported at the Rugby Committee meeting in January 2022 that conversion from Canterbury Give It A Try participation to clubs was at 50%.

** Coaches currently registered on RugbyConnect where the person

self-registers. Clubs will assign these coaches to teams and record this on RugbyConnect at which point the IRFU will be able to further segment the data into qualification and level.

***This is the number of fully qualified referees. There are many more affiliated referees whose data have not yet been captured.

3.2 THEME 1: INCREASING ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION – WIDENING THE TALENT POOL

3.2.1 Engagement – discovering rugby

There is already considerable activity driving engagement in rugby across schools and clubs. Initiatives such as Aldi Play Rugby in primary schools, Canterbury Give It A Try in clubs, X Rugby 7s in secondary schools and Aviva Minis, are reaching high numbers of girls with good conversion from engagement into regular club participation. This is, in part, due to detailed operational planning, including through the Covid pandemic, which set targets, activities and lead responsibility which could be easily tracked and evaluated.

Survey respondents noted that women over the age of 25 are most likely to have entered the game through rugby clubs whilst women under the age of 25 engaged through multiple entry points including primary and secondary schools, and junior sections at clubs. This is evidence that the ways in which girls and women can take up the game are broadening and becoming more accessible at younger ages, and that IRFU strategies in respect of younger female players are proving to be effective.

In addition, although 15s is the format played by most survey respondents, (86%), 1 in 10 play Non-Contact Rugby and 4% most regularly play 7s. Non-contact formats of the game and 7s can be excellent introductory vehicles, driving club membership and increasing the 7s and 15s talent pools. Multiple playing opportunities in different formats can be created without requiring conversion to 15s or competitive 7s, making the game accessible on a recreational basis to all ages and abilities. All of these are valid and valuable rugby experiences that enable a diverse range of women and girls to take up, play and enjoy rugby in different environments. Further staffing to help broaden the access points to the game through the availability of 15s, 7s and Non-Contact Rugby offerings in schools will assist in broadening the talent pool.

There is a clear opportunity for the game to grow. For example, demand for Give It A Try sessions currently exceeds capacity with a waiting list for the 2022-23

season. Almost all interviewees commented that the greatest growth area for rugby in Ireland will be the Girls and Women's Game. Most interviewees wanted to see an increase in development officers in the women's grassroots game as this will be vital to maximise the opportunities for more players to play, otherwise the demand may be lost.

Whilst increasing participation seems imminent, it currently presents a risk for Irish Rugby as demand could potentially exceed supply. Specifically, the numbers of clubs, coaches and volunteers must increase to service the increased numbers of girls and women wanting to play. The capacity of existing development teams to support growth in schools and clubs is limited and, when compared with the resource available across the game, this places significant strain on the Provincial Women's Development and Participation Officers. The lack of capacity may already be hindering growth.

Women's Development Officer work programmes need to be reviewed. Areas such as talent identification, regional talent programmes, leadership, and coaching, need to be aligned through the establishment of an elite player pathway model which should be led by High Performance in consultation with the Domestic Game and the Provinces.

A further risk is clubs' capacity to meet the diverse and growing needs of their community. Of the players, coaches, referees, and volunteers who responded to the survey question about playing opportunities, only 59% believe there are sufficient opportunities to play locally. Clubs often cite a lack of facilities as a barrier to involving girls and women, and this will need to be addressed through facilities strategies and investment. Schools on the other hand are spread throughout the communities, can provide both a safe environment and facilities for girls to be able to play the game, and therefore need to be given greater consideration. Schools that foster the Women's Game can then be supported by local Club Community Rugby Officers (CCROs) in their geographical areas.

In conjunction with this, a continued focus on

engagement through existing initiatives and building effective working relationships should be maintained.

This should be aligned to a stronger focus on gathering more information on participants through these programmes, and a more strategic alignment with High Performance in giving access to girls who are currently in schools that do not play rugby should be a priority.

The game's exposure can be further enhanced by creating a single, identifiable, and accessible nationally-led women's campaign. This may be a further development of the existing #NothingLikelt programme, or a new brand that inspires girls and women to take up rugby. This campaign needs to reflect the offerings of Non-Contact Rugby, 7s and 15s as formats and point out, not just the participation opportunities and values of rugby but also the global nature of rugby with regard to World Cups and the Olympic Games. Sport England's *This Girl Can* and the RFU's *Inner Warrior* are some examples of dynamic campaigns that aim to present sport and rugby as accessible, inclusive and fun. Further developing the #NothingLikelt campaign to promote the game's unique selling points around inclusion, values and enjoyment, will not only attract new players but will reinforce the distinctive nature of rugby. This campaign should target alignment across all provinces to promote the opportunities and pathways as they evolve.

3.2.2 Club provision

Interviewees were asked if clubs in Ireland are ready to establish and support women's teams, coaches and volunteers and the vast majority stated that some clubs are wholly committed and fully inclusive, and more are starting to recognise the opportunities and benefits of including women's sections. However, overall, there is still work to be done to promote the case for women's involvement at club level.

Some interviewees provided examples of women's teams starting and then having to merge or even fold altogether. It was suggested that fewer teams and more players should be the primary focus to prevent such situations arising, however this can lead to issues of accessibility, geographical location, playing

opportunities if squads are bigger, and club capacity to run multiple women's teams. The quality of the experience needs to be considered and, therefore clubs need to have some minimum criteria to operate women's teams. Competition structures need to be examined to ensure that they can adequately support the numbers of teams and clubs by providing meaningful quality and quantity of matches.

A sizeable minority of interviewees focused on the need to make the game as available to girls and women as it is to boys and men, and whilst schools provision opens this opportunity up, clubs are currently the primary route for young players. If there is limited local club access, return journey times of 90 minutes or 2 hours to train and play can create time and financial pressure on parents and guardians, thereby reducing opportunities. The current model where Club Community Rugby Officers (CCRO's) are given responsibilities to foster relationships and provide expertise with a certain number of schools within their geographic areas should continue with further emphasis on accessing more schools, to help build bridges for players who want to cross from school to club based on the positive experiences they have to date.

The IRFU Youth Council undertook a review of club provision in 2019-20 to produce a Club Resource Booklet. The recommendations resonate with the findings of this review. Specifically, the allocation of club resources is highlighted as an area for improvement:

Ensure that club resources including dressing rooms, pitches and access to gym facilities are shared equally among club members was a consistent theme in each consultation. Players alluded to the fact that having fair access to resources boosted morale among players and created a united feeling between their team and other teams in the club. The relegation of younger and women's teams to back pitches had the opposite effect with players feeling that their contribution to the club was not recognised.

Strategic investment by the IRFU should naturally flow from strategic priorities and investment in clubs should take this into consideration.

The IRFU should take specific measures to reinforce its

strategic commitment by incentivising clubs to enhance their facilities and to improve the accessibility of club spaces to girls and women. Similarly, expectations around females in volunteer and management positions in clubs could form a part of IRFU club funding criteria to ensure clubs are proactively engaging women at all levels. Indeed, the IRFU have already mandated that all provinces should appoint at least one female representative on the IRFU's Union Committee by no later than the Annual Meeting in 2023. This is a positive example of the type of action that can be taken to improve gender balance and diversity for the benefit of the game as a whole.

Behavioural as well as structural factors can impact the quality of experience girls and women face, and key to this is ensuring that clubs are welcoming for women. This too represents an opportunity and one that the IRFU can promote through enhanced and explicit policy, education and support. Tackling any type of discrimination with a zero tolerance approach to such behaviour, alongside a proactive approach to promoting inclusion, will reinforce the Union's commitment and assist in reducing such incidents.

Also recommended as part of this review is to update the IRFU website guidance for 'Running Your Club' to ensure it is current and provides the latest advice on how to create, develop and grow a girls' or women's section, and guidance on how to attract and involve female leaders. Currently, guidance on the website relating to membership of a Club's Rugby Committee shows the degree to which a men's 1st team might be prioritised in terms of representation and this should be reviewed. Revised resources will help ensure clubs can embed gender parity into their structures.

Many interviewees stated that some clubs focus the majority of their resources on the men's 1st team with the women's team perceived as a lower priority. It should be noted that this is not the case for all clubs, and some were praised for having exceptional management and playing structures that were equitable and fully inclusive.

Despite the information being available on the IRFU website, over 90% of people interviewed, including development staff, said they were not aware of a central governance and inclusion resource for clubs,

suggesting that communication of guidance and policy is another area where the IRFU could help clubs. Developing an updated club guidance resource that brings together good governance practice, business development and progressive approaches to diversity and inclusion, would help clubs understand the inter-relationship between the three areas.

This could be complemented by a club development scheme that prioritises resources, including development staff's time and expertise, on those clubs that demonstrate a clear commitment to inclusion and involving women at all levels. The resource should be developed with provincial input to ensure it is relevant and applicable to all clubs.

Overall, the feedback from the review was that rugby development staff work exceptionally hard and have achieved great success in developing the game despite the challenges of the pandemic. There are also an increasing number of clubs who want to establish women's sections. However, the capacity and deployment of development staff to clubs was a topic frequently mentioned in the interviews. In particular, the number of dedicated women's development or participation officers remains low compared with the number of Community Rugby Officers, Development Officers and other development staff across the Provinces. A review of the roles and responsibilities of the workforce should be undertaken to ensure alignment and optimise resourcing.

Currently there are 8 Women's Development Officers across the Provinces, however it was stated several times by IRFU and Provincial development staff that all development and participation staff have a responsibility to grow the Women's Game. There is clearly some excellent work across the Provinces by a number of people in different development roles. The degree to which all development officers are held accountable for achieving the Women in Rugby Action Plan objectives and targets appears variable. There needs to be greater alignment between Provinces and the IRFU. For example, if there is to be a centralised campaign like #NothingLikeIt then there also needs to be a centralised strategy that is communicated through this campaign for how girls can access and play the game. Rugby and the way it is offered around the country should aim to be very



similar if not identical, with same language used around this plan and the game offerings. This type of alignment will then enable High Performance to work in a more effective and efficient way with the various participation officers. The accountability of women's development staff is through the Rugby Development Department but needs to be aligned to the Head of Women's Performance and Pathways to facilitate the consistent delivery of an aligned programme between High Performance and the Domestic Game.

It was suggested that some clubs looking to appoint Community Rugby Officers tend to focus on boys and men more often than women and girls. Staff and volunteers at national and Provincial levels repeatedly voiced the need for an increase in "troops on the ground" that focus on women and girls, and this is a key recommendation from the review.

At this point, rugby in Ireland still needs dedicated roles for the Women's Game but, over time, a move towards a fully integrated development function – all staff responsible for girls and women, boys and men – could create a more effective and efficient delivery model. This is a review recommendation, and it should be achievable by 2027.

As these community roles are partly funded by the IRFU, a move to prioritise their deployment, or at least the level of funding towards their deployment, should naturally support strategic priorities, including Women's Rugby. A review and updating of current investment policy, organisational structures, role descriptions and responsibilities will better align actual development activity with growth potential and High Performance outcomes.

Similarly, development staff working directly with schools and clubs will likely have key performance indicators (KPI) relating to engagement and participation by girls and women, and through the performance management system, be held to account for achieving these. Where these KPIs are newly added to some roles, it may be necessary to provide training and development to ensure all development staff are confident working with girls and women.

Over time, the IRFU and Provinces will need to move to fully integrated development workforce, all of whom

have responsibility for meeting targets in relation to girls and women, including coaching and refereeing.

3.2.3 Schools and Colleges rugby

Schools are responding positively to X Rugby 7s and other available formats. However, uptake by schools in Ireland remains comparatively low for girls compared with other sports.

Barriers cited by survey respondents and interviewees include:

- Reluctance by school leaders to start rugby for girls
- Prevalence and school support for other sports, in particular Gaelic games and hockey for girls
- Lack of PE teacher expertise and confidence

There is an opportunity for the IRFU to further develop a resource toolkit specifically for girls' rugby in schools to build on Aldi Play Rugby and Canterbury Give it a Try. An organised introductory programme and suitable competition programmes should be developed which should involve a coordinated sequencing and offering through the age groups of Non-Contact Rugby, X Rugby 7s, contact 7s and 15s. This might include online webinars, guidance materials, forums, and case studies as well as kit and support. The aim would be to build teachers' confidence and skills in running girls' rugby sessions and ultimately deliver safe and enjoyable experiences for more girls.

Leinster Rugby has developed a Club Focus programme that connects clubs with three local schools. The aim is to build a relationship that offers coaching in schools and encourages children to join the club as well as providing clubs with support in other areas such as governance and business development. Those involved in the scheme must first meet standards around volunteering, coaching and leadership.

As the women's development workforce grows, Participation Officers can be deployed specifically to support teachers as they introduce the game to girls. This technical guidance and encouragement will complement the schoolgirls' rugby toolkit and accelerate the development of teachers' skills and confidence. Noting that other popular sports



already have a place in curricular and extra-curricular programmes, dedicated attention will be needed to identify and support schools as they grow girls' programmes, with development staff and resources applied to this area. In addition to the IRFU resources, CCROs can be given responsibility to deliver coaching expertise to the aligned schools in their geographic area to expedite these schools' rugby programme growth.

Participation Officers would then work alongside Women's Development Officers and other development staff to ensure there is a smooth transition into local clubs where girls can access coaching and club playing opportunities. These school-club links could create a steady stream of young players into the game with options to play multiple formats of the game and keep them, even as they leave school. The IRFU should also look at a 'school only' pathway where a player does not want to transfer to a club, and the creation of school-third-level links should also be considered.

Such a scheme could be further developed to assist development staff in supporting school and club links, creating natural entry points in schools that exit seamlessly to local clubs, where girls can continue to develop, and club mini and youth sections can grow. This represents the first stage of a player pathway and gives girls who are new to the game, including those who play other sports, a natural route to competitive rugby.

Colleges and Universities offer recreational and organised competition formats to young women, and this too is an area for potential growth. This is a key opportunity to attract athletes into rugby by creating a High Performance-based competition between Colleges and Universities throughout Ireland. Building on the existing partnership with Student Sport Ireland, the IRFU can link the school pathway with the Universities and Colleges. A high standard National Universities and Colleges competition that combines school leavers with new talent from other sports at university level could be a real point of difference for Women's Rugby in Ireland. It also could have the capacity to attract international students including those with Irish heritage into this model. Development staff, in particular Participation Officers, should provide support to Colleges through a variety of formats – Non-Contact Rugby, 7s and 15s – and, as with school to club links, create a pathway into clubs. Attracting players who have experience of other sports into the game through informal rugby may mean they can be fast-tracked into regional centres of excellence if they demonstrate rugby potential.

Schools need to be included immediately if we are to attract new athletes to rugby and then establish the link to clubs from there. A specific focus on utilising Non-Contact Rugby, 7s and 15s in schools to attract new players needs to be included immediately and this needs to be supported by fit-for-purpose competition models in both schools and clubs.



Theme 1 Recommendations

The recommendations are presented below with an indicative timeline for implementation. In addition, the colour coding suggests where there are opportunities to build on current work in the short term or to embark on new opportunities where resource implications may be lower.

- New initiative arising from review
- ◉ Already underway or being reviewed
- ◉ Risk mitigation – act to address issues as soon as practicably possible
- ◉ New opportunities that can be introduced with relatively low resource implications and/or easily controlled by IRFU leads



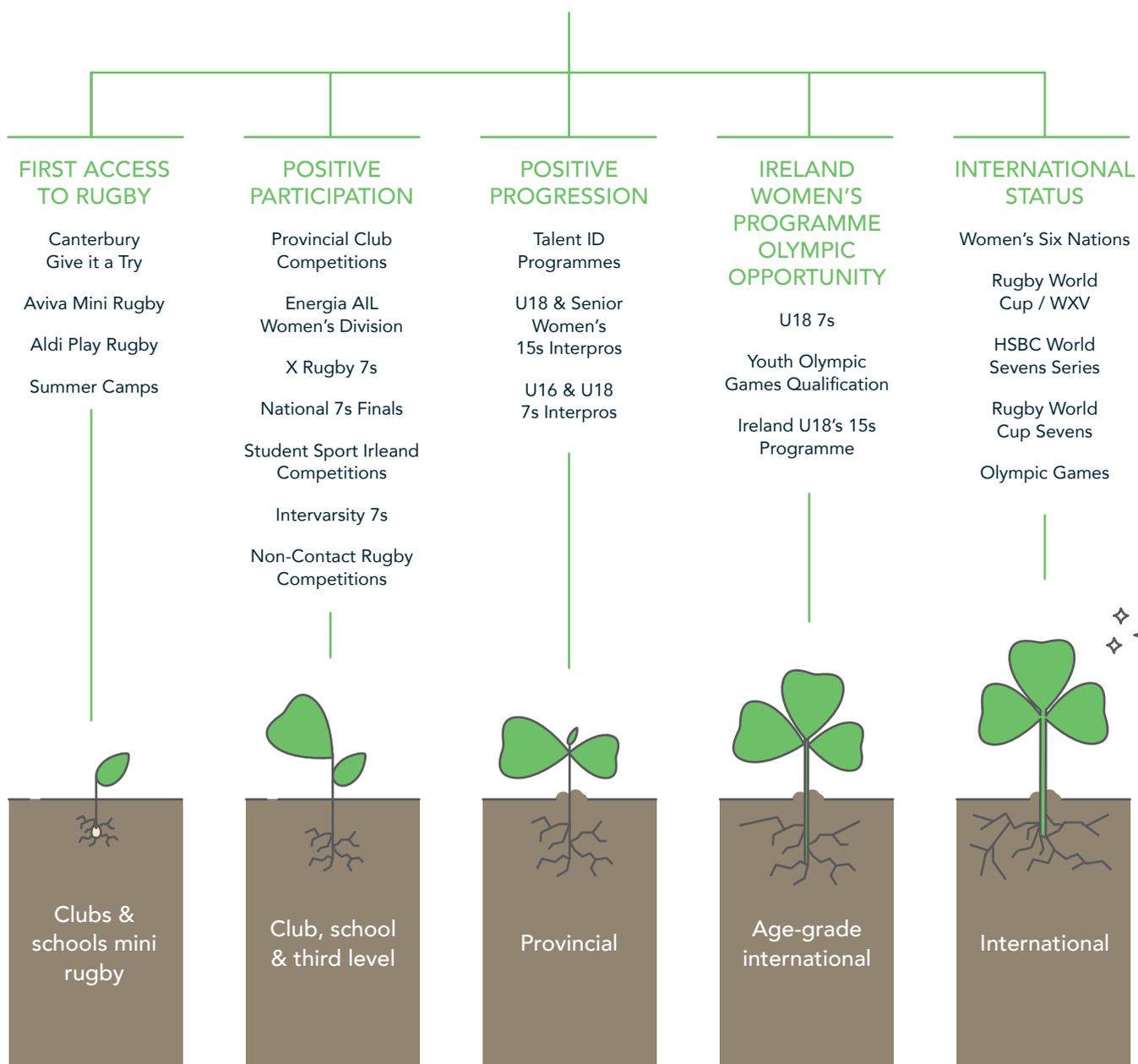
Theme	Key Recommendations	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026	2026-2027
Increasing Engagement and Participation – Widening the Talent Pool	Programmes					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to develop and grow Aldi Play Rugby, Canterbury Give It A Try with a focus on retaining girls and converting them to club members 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a club support programme delivered through development staff, which should offer additional time and funding to clubs that demonstrate a willingness to modernise, adopting sound business practices 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	People					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure the game development workforce has the capacity to meet the rising demand for engagement and participation programmes in schools and clubs 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure a minimum of 4 Women’s Development Officers are supported by a minimum of 4 Participation Officers in each Province 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Resources					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a schools guidance resource to build the confidence and competence of teachers introducing rugby to girls This should be accompanied by online webinars, session plans and case studies 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update and disseminate club development materials and create a single easily-accessible resource that helps build well-governed, inclusive and sustainable clubs across Ireland 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and update club funding and excellence schemes to ensure clubs are incentivised to develop female players, coaches, referees and leaders 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and update current facility funding criteria with grants prioritised for those clubs, at any level, seeking to enhance their facilities to better serve girls and women 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Promotion						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and fund a national campaign around the recommendations of this report to inform, inspire and attract girls into the game, including those who participate in other sports 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

All recommendations will be subject to full costing and funding availability. The timelines against each recommendation are indicative.

3.3 THEME 2: ALIGNING DOMESTIC GAME AND HIGH-PERFORMANCE PATHWAYS

IRFU WOMEN'S 15s AND 7s RUGBY PATHWAY

THE PURPOSE





Whilst this image captures the primary points of entry into the game and the competition pathway, there is less detail about how each individual player will be supported to develop technical, tactical, physical, mental and life skills as their journey progresses from age group to adult rugby.

Over half of survey respondents did not agree that female players have access to adequate coaching, strength and conditioning, and other programme support. Furthermore, only 40% believe the existing pathway is visible and accessible.

The pathway programme in the provinces - as it currently exists - has minimal alignment with the national requirements. It attempts to identify and support players who have the potential to play rugby at higher levels and is predominantly led and delivered by development staff through Provincial structures. In some areas, regional hubs have been established to provide adults, U18s and, in some cases, U16s, with additional coaching, strength and conditioning, nutritional advice and other support. However, these are dependent on available resource and are not operated in direct collaboration with High Performance personnel. An aligned national performance pathway with agreed player development model does not currently exist.

The High Performance department under the supervision of the new Head of Women's Performance and Pathways needs to lead the development of a standardised performance model similar to that of the men's game but tailored to the nuances of the Women's Game in Ireland. This would see an initial investment

in Elite Talent coaches throughout the provinces along with athletic performance development coaches to oversee physical development. This will then build into nutritional support and education and increased medical support in the subsequent years. At that point this aligned High Performance player pathway can be documented and communicated to prospective players.

Several Provincial staff and volunteers acknowledged that the people leading regional pathway programmes were fully committed to their success and some development staff have High Performance expertise and experience. However, this did not necessarily apply to all those leading talent programmes and there was resounding support for greater High Performance leadership and expertise.

International Benchmarking

Drawing on international comparisons, all leading nations currently have a regional programme for U18s and all except England, France and the USA, have regional academies/centres of excellence for seniors. England and France rely on their elite clubs to deliver elements of their high-performance programmes and the USA has less than 25% of its 15s squad living in the country – most are playing in England.

New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Fiji, Scotland, Wales and Spain have all established regional or Provincial academies/centres of excellence, which provide pathway programme support to their 15s senior squad as well as U18s and, in some cases U16s.

Pathway Structures	Age Grade U16 and/or U18	U20	Regional/Provincial Centres
Australia	✓	✗	✓
Canada	✓	✓	✓
England	✓	✓	✗
Fiji	✓	✗	✓
France	✓	✓	✗
New Zealand	✓	✗	✓
Scotland	✓	✓	✓
Spain	✓	✗	✓
USA	✗	✓	✗
Wales	✓	✓	✓

In all cases, the talent pathway and player development programmes are led and managed by each union’s High Performance department.

There is a desire to see greater IRFU High Performance leadership of the women’s pathway. One of the most important outputs of this review is the need for the Rugby Development and High Performance Departments to work more closely together to create a visible, high quality, fully resourced pathway, as the most important outcome from the review. This will require greater integration between High Performance and Provincial teams. The primary recommendation in relation to player pathways is that the High Performance Unit leads the pathway programme which should incorporate a coaching syllabus, strength and conditioning, life skills, nutrition and analysis along with sports medicine support.

With participation numbers rising and current elite squads performing well, there is an excellent opportunity for the IRFU to build a high quality, accessible pathway that captures available talent. The pipeline must be established quickly to ensure young players do not choose other options for the lack of opportunity locally.

The specific outcomes that could be achieved include:

- Increased identification and retention of young talent from engagement programmes in schools and club youth sections
- Quality talent transfer athletes will require top level coaching and access to meaningful competitive competition structures to choose rugby over their existing sport. We must ensure that rugby can offer all of the above
- A widening of the talent pool that is monitored and tracked by High Performance so U18s and senior 7s and 15s coaches have access to detailed information on the depth of talent available, and each player’s progress
- An improved ability to plan elite level success in WXVs (from 2023), Rugby World Cups in 2025, 2026 (7s) and 2029 and Olympics (2024, 2028)
- Opportunities to identify, develop and deploy female coaches to meaningful competitions with more experienced coaches as part of their continuing professional development
- Benefits to Provincial squads from regional hubs as improved player monitoring would contribute to player identification and selection at Provincial levels

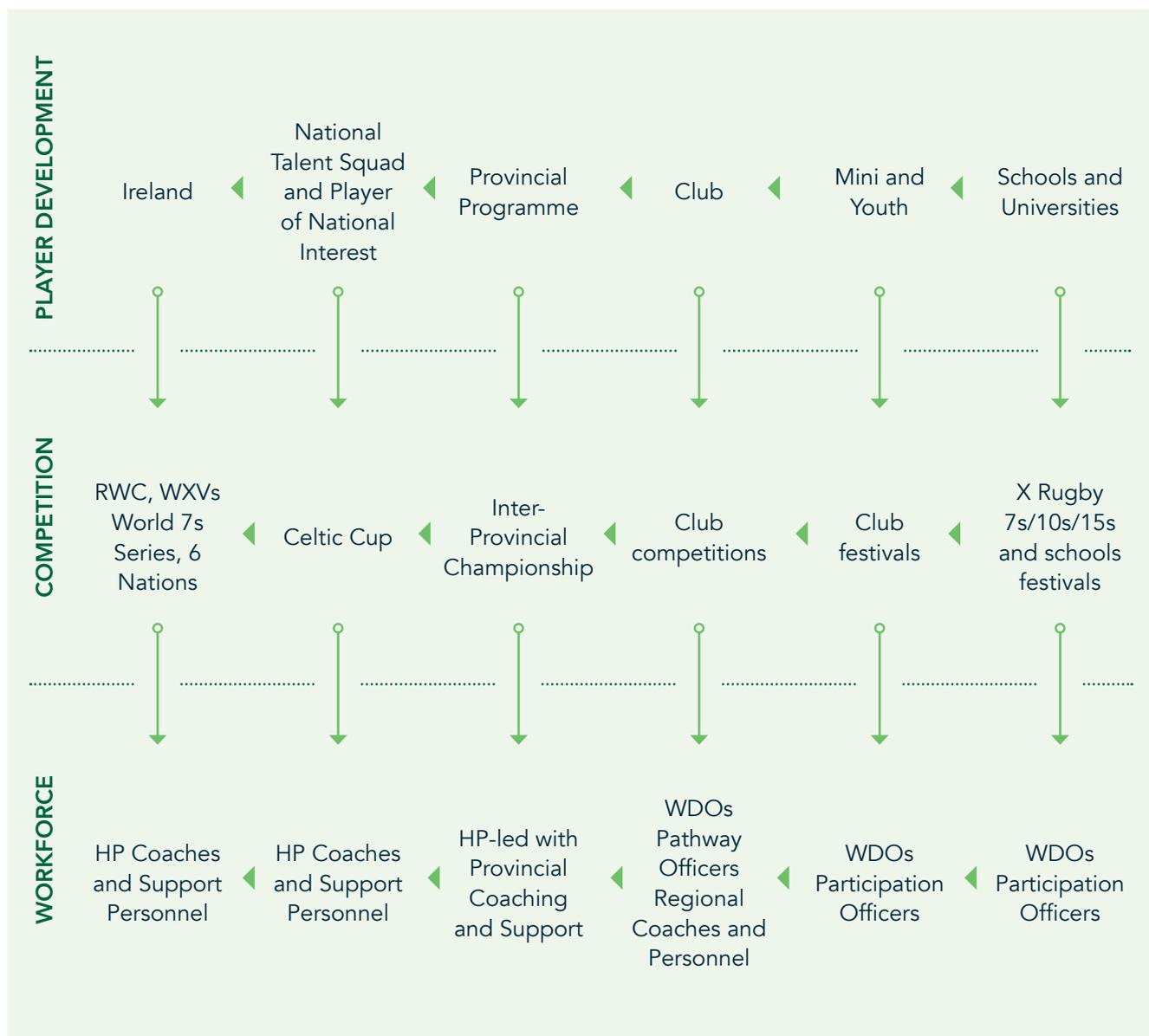
- A centralised model is essential for fully contracted players to maximise the benefits for the investment. The Regional Hub model or Women’s National Talent Squad (WNTS) will give opportunities for young players to train and develop in their locality (without having to migrate / travel long distances)
- Visible role models who can inspire others in their area, creating aspiration amongst younger players.

While it is recognised that this will take time to develop, ultimately, the programme would ideally be delivered with dedicated High Performance resource in each Province including:

- Pathway/Talent officers
- Coaches with the qualifications, skills, and experience to coach pathway players
- Strength and conditioning leads
- Lifestyle, sports medicine, analysis, and nutrition support

Identifying and retaining players with potential will be possible if there is equitable access to regional programmes. Initially, regional hubs may be based in existing Provincial academies, Universities, or clubs, where facilities meet required standards. Noting that access to current Provincial level facilities may be challenging due to demand, links to Universities could prove particularly valuable. There may be an opportunity to create more meaningful partnerships that enable access to university facilities and expertise, as well as helping to promote rugby at university level.

The following aims to capture the player development, competition, and workforce elements of the pathway, and how players would be supported by relevant development or performance departments at each stage:



Theme 2 Recommendations

The recommendations are presented below with an indicative timeline for implementation.

- New initiative arising from review
- ◉ Already underway or being reviewed
- ◉ Risk mitigation – act to address issues as soon as practicably possible
- ◉ New opportunities that can be introduced with relatively low resource implications and/or easily controlled by IRFU leads



Theme	Key Recommendations	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026	2026-2027
Aligning Domestic Game and High Performance Pathways	Programmes					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working in partnership with Domestic Rugby and Provincial performance leads, the High Performance Unit should lead the development of a new vision and agreed outcomes for the player pathway 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In consultation with Provincial teams, the High Performance Unit should design a player development programme that will identify and develop players (U16, U18 and senior) who have the potential to represent Ireland 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	People					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appoint (through an open process) at least 2 Athletic Dev / Talent Coaches per Province to co-ordinate player identification and pathway provision (ideally in 2022-23) This should grow to 1 Pathway Development Manager and sufficient Pathway Officers per province as soon as is practicable to manage growth Recruit (through an open process) and develop coaches, sports science and medicine, and lifestyle specialists of the requisite level and quality to deliver each component of the regional programme Working collaboratively, Provincial development staff and Talent Officers to identify female coaches with potential to progress These should be offered Coach Development Experience and deployed to regional programmes to develop their skills and experience 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
		--	✓	✓	✓	✓
		--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Places					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a network of regional centres of excellence across each Province that will deliver high quality coaching, sports science, sports medicine and lifestyle support to identified players 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Promotion					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively promote the pathway programme, opportunities for player identification and progression, alignment between club, Provincial and international, and locations of all centres to schools, clubs, coaches and volunteers 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓

All recommendations will be subject to full costing and funding availability. The timelines against each recommendation are indicative.

3.4 THEME 3: CREATING OPTIMUM COMPETITION STRUCTURES

3.4.1 Recreational games

Creating competition structures that are appropriate to existing clubs and leagues whilst maintaining the ability to adapt to change is a challenge all governing bodies face. It is good practice to review competition structures on a regular basis as population bases grow or decline, and societal factors or demand influence capacity. Whilst many rugby unions are seeing the number of male adult teams falling, they are preparing for growth in women's teams and the IRFU is no different in this regard.

Not all women and girls want to play competitive contact rugby and, with only 1 in 10 survey respondents saying they mostly play non-contact, this is an area of potential growth. Non-Contact Rugby may or may not happen in schools, clubs or universities but they are ideal for attracting new people to rugby, even if they never progress beyond non-contact formats. The progression from Non-Contact Rugby into X Rugby 7s and then into full contact 7s can be carefully managed so that it caters for new players to the sport to feel safe and to maximise the enjoyment of the game whilst learning the nuances of each format. Subject to capacity, festivals, informal leagues, and similar competition models can reach large number relatively quickly.

Information on Non-Contact Rugby is very mixed and there would be much benefit to be gained from the IRFU and Provincial development leads creating a non-contact rugby plan that builds on current successes in 15s and 7s. It would also ensure greater consistency of approach to a format that has much to offer, especially to women discovering rugby.

Without exception, participants in the review predict growth in female participants and the early experience of competitions for anyone trying rugby for the first time is critical to whether they stay involved and progress. There is a lot of very creative and effective development work happening across the Provinces and there is no single recommendation in this area. The IRFU and Provincial teams will want to capture innovative practice and share this, especially where different formats, for example non-contact, 7s, and 10s

are being used to offer an enjoyable game experience whilst ensuring that matches are not cancelled.

As the game evolves the IRFU must, and will, continue to regularly review the competition models to reflect teams' participation and ensure it supports player pathway and development needs

3.4.2 Provincial leagues

Club rugby at all levels is currently the bedrock of the competitive game and the structure in Ireland is based primarily on Provincial leagues. Notwithstanding situations where some teams fold, such leagues appear to be working satisfactorily as a natural pyramid within each Province, with promotion and relegation. The number of competitions, divisions and teams varies across each Province with significantly greater numbers in Leinster. A centralised alignment of competition structures, which recognises differences in the local environment, should be the goal here.

Evolving the league competitions to reflect the reality of the participants, their development needs and the game may be necessary as club and team numbers rise, however the primary focus of development staff should be on supporting clubs to introduce, include and sustain women's teams. Thereafter, their involvement at the relevant competitive level should reflect club ambitions and capacity.

The need for local access to clubs, local and provincial leagues, and regular games remains a challenge. An engagement campaign coupled with a club development programme actively supported by development staff and further IRFU investment in resources should help increase the number, quality and sustainability of clubs that welcome and support women's teams.

3.4.3 All Ireland League

The All Ireland League (AIL) was an area of significant discussion and warranted a specific group meeting with clubs to explore in depth.

The 2022/23 season was to feature 10 teams in the AIL with 1 from Connacht, 2 from Ulster, 2 from Munster and 5 from Leinster. Since its inception in its current form, results have been dominated by Dublin clubs and concern has grown about the AIL's ability to offer genuine competition across Ireland.

Survey respondents and a majority of interviewees raised specific concerns regarding the migration of players to Dublin from their home Provinces in order to play for the more dominant clubs. This movement is based on a perception that players who aspire to play for Ireland would not be seen if they were not in Dublin and close to High Performance personnel.

The feedback on this topic from a range of people – development, performance, Provincial, national, volunteers and staff – was consistent throughout this review.

Fewer than 2 out of 3 survey respondents believe that the AIL is a high quality competition that helps prepare players for international rugby. This is not an emphatic endorsement and underlines the need for review and change. For any High Performance Pathway to succeed, it must be underpinned by competition models that are fit for purpose. This will help keep players in the game and attract new players from other sports.

There is a genuine desire for a league that involves clubs from across all Provinces, however this has been counteracted by the movement of players to Dublin, under the impression that being outside of Dublin limits their opportunities. This has created situations whereby Ireland internationals are playing fewer minutes in club games as there is more than one international or Player of National Interest (PONI) in the same position at the same club.

The clustering of elite players in few teams does not support a competitive league and reduces the level of physical, technical, and tactical challenge players face each week. In short, such a situation is less likely to prepare players for elite level rugby. In addition, the lack of competitive games makes it more difficult to promote and build a viable commercial offering due to the predictability of the outcome of too many AIL games.

Group discussions and interviews on this subject drew some of the most passionate and creative responses. Over 90% of interviewees wanted a different AIL model with 68% proposing a reduction in the number of teams. The recommendation contained in this report is drawn from the findings of the review and robust discussions at Steering Group level, and aims to establish the AIL as a competition that offers a pathway to clubs with aspirations as well as ensuring more competitive games.

Many interviewees suggested that Ireland players be deployed by the IRFU to AIL teams to encourage players to stay in their home Provinces and deter migration. Point systems, such as that which exists in the AIL Men's Divisions, were also suggested, with points awarded for players developed through the club pathway, and deducted for movement between senior clubs.

Whilst there were a number of positive and constructive proposals offered during the review, the fundamental question to be answered is around the purpose of the AIL. Based on feedback, there remains confusion about its purpose as a performance league, player development vehicle, community and recreational rugby competition or the natural top of a pyramid.

Contextually, the awarding of contracts to Ireland 15s players and the expansion of Women 15s international competitions must also be considered. Specifically, senior international players will now be involved in 6 Nations and WXV campaigns each year, with a Rugby World Cup every fourth year from 2025. These are long and demanding periods during which players are unlikely to be available to clubs, however club rugby must continue to offer regular playing opportunities even as senior players are on international duty.

This brings us to the role of the Interprovincial Championships which take place each season at senior, U18 and U16 (7s only) levels. Throughout the review, representing one's Province was highlighted as a significant ambition for all players and it remains an integral part of a player's journey to the Irish jersey.

61% of survey respondents agreed that the senior Interprovincial Championship was a high-quality competition that helped prepare players for international

rugby. Alongside the 62% to the same question about the AIL, this highlights the potential confusion as to whether the AIL or Interprovincial Championship is the performance competition perceived by High Performance as the best vehicle through which to identify, develop and select Ireland squads.

The primary recommendation under this theme is that the AIL is expanded to 12 teams in two divisions of 6 teams from 2023-24, with promotion and relegation thereafter. This will be the natural pinnacle of a club competition pyramid that should allow more teams from across Ireland to play in a national league whilst maintaining higher levels of competition between them through a 6 team division.

Linking to the pathway recommendations, Talent Officers in each Province will work closely with development staff to identify players within schools or clubs with the potential to progress to higher levels. Further contact and support regionally will ensure players can be seen and they will have equal chances to represent their Province, from where they can move into national High Performance programmes having been identified by national coaches through Provincial programmes. This model should apply to U18s and seniors with an U16s National Training Squad to be added.

Beyond 2024, subject to club and pathway growth, the AIL could expand to 8 or more teams with a particular drive to balance the number of Tier 1 and Tier 2 clubs from all Provinces. A two-tier AIL of 16 teams could be a reasonable aspiration by 2027. Further consultation will be needed to establish which clubs start in each league and at this stage there no specific recommendation in relation to minimum operation standards. However, to ensure sustainability and quality, the IRFU may reasonably ask for commitments and confirmation from clubs in respect of coaching, programme support, facilities, and operations in order to participate in the AIL. Funding to AIL clubs should continue to incentivise clubs and support programme delivery in areas such as coaching and strength and conditioning.

The IRFU will need to undertake a review of participating teams and competition structures to ensure they reflect meaningful competitions and sustainability as the growth of teams and competitions is linked directly to the deployment of additional women's development officers.

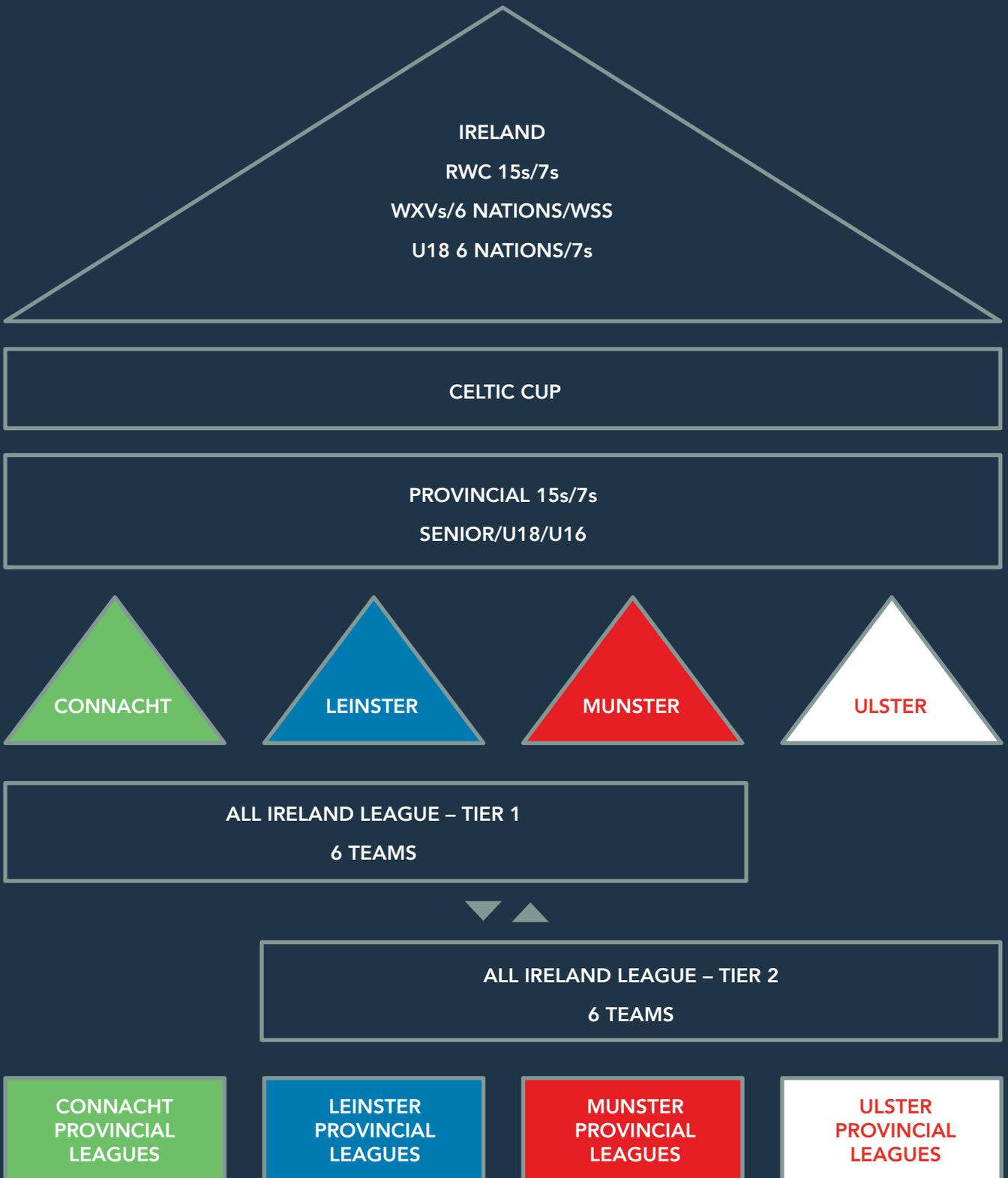
3.4.4 Women's Interprovincial Championship

The Interprovincial Championship will be the performance competition that offers national squad players and those who have not yet been selected internationally, at any age group, the opportunity to be identified and nurtured. It is envisaged that in three to five years we are able to move to a further-developed Provincial model as players are developed through the system at Provincial level. This Provincial focus should ultimately be underpinned by regional pathway provision to encourage players with talent to be supported whilst they continue their club rugby within the Province. Whilst this will not stop natural migration to Dublin, it should provide greater opportunity to players who might otherwise have been lost to the game due to the pressures of distance or finance.

In terms of Interprovincial competition models, for example, whether there are home and away fixtures, these will be subject to season planning that will need to consider 6 Nations, WXVs and other High Performance commitments.

This clarification around club and Interprovincial competitions will assist in identifying and preparing players for the possibility of a Celtic Cup – the working title of a potential cross-border competition involving Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Although details of such a competition were not fully known at the time of writing, it is still important to plan for the opportunities a Celtic Cup might bring. It would represent a level of senior competition higher than the Interprovincial Championship, especially if only two Irish teams are entered, and would sit just below Ireland international level.

Proposed competition pathway from 2023-24



Theme 3 Recommendations

The recommendations are presented below with an indicative timeline for implementation. In addition, the colour coding suggests where there are opportunities to build on current work fairly quickly or to embark on new opportunities where resource implications may be lower.

- New initiative arising from review
- ◉ Already underway or being reviewed
- ◉ Risk mitigation – act to address issues as soon as practicably possible
- ◉ New opportunities that can be introduced with relatively low resource implications and/or easily controlled by IRFU leads



Theme	Key Recommendations	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026	2026-2027
Creating Optimum Competition Structures	Minis and Youth					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain a focus on enjoyment and engagement through existing programmes whilst building club capacity as girls move into youth and adult competitions and leagues 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Provincial Leagues					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audit Provincial league competitions to identify vulnerable clubs with player number challenges and look to bolster or merge with neighbouring clubs 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain the natural pyramid of competition for those seeking regular league matches that lead to promotion and relegation 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop standardised guidance for clubs operating on a recreational basis that enables adult 12s, 10s or 7s games to be played in the event of a shortage of players 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	All Ireland League					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a 12 team, two division national league with AIL Tier 1 and AIL Tier 2. Each league to involve 6 teams playing home and away fixtures with promotion and relegation (and to grow over time). 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Interprovincial Competition					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively promote the pathway programme, opportunities for player identification and progression, alignment between club, Provincial and international, and locations of all centres to schools, clubs, coaches and volunteers 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure the timing of Interprovincial preparation and competition is aligned to help inform selection for international campaigns 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruit and deploy coaches and support personnel with the requisite qualifications and experience to support Provincial squads A minimum of one suitably qualified female coach to be allocated to each team from 2023-24 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan and communicate how teams will be selected and prepared for a Celtic Cup competition 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

All recommendations will be subject to full costing and funding availability. The timelines against each recommendation are indicative.



3.5 THEME 4: ENABLING GREATER INCLUSIVITY

In 2019, Leinster Rugby undertook an Inclusivity Review (6) and the consultation element of the process stated that:

Current female representation in Leinster Rugby governance is insufficient and pro-active steps are needed to foster greater women’s participation at all levels of the game

Leinster has since established an Inclusivity Committee in addition to its women’s committee structures. This committee’s remit goes beyond gender and considers how the Province can increase diversity across the game and also become more inclusive.

The 2022 review of the IRFU Women in Rugby Action Plan has established very similar findings. While undoubtedly progress has been made, players, volunteers, club representatives, staff, senior volunteers and external stakeholders, including commercial partners, all stated a desire to see a Union that is more inclusive.

The IRFU continues to work towards becoming an inclusive organisation, however the pace of progress is perceived as slow and the Union can do more to promote a diverse leadership. Expectations of many male and female staff and volunteers, survey respondents, as well as external stakeholders is that the way in which game’s leadership is appointed needs to be adjusted to a more transparent and inclusive model.

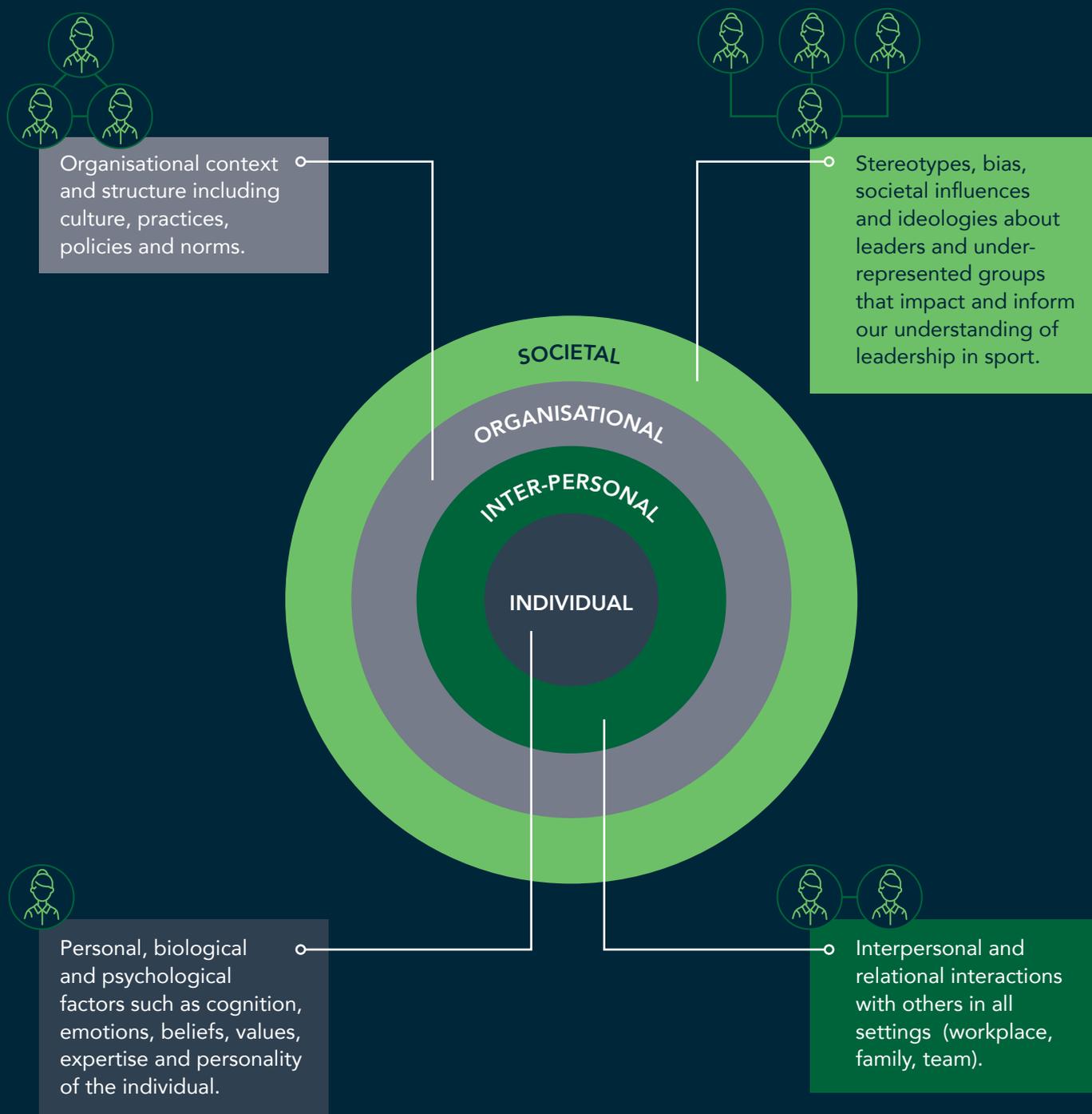
3.5.1 Coaching and Refereeing

World Rugby Coaching Toolkit Key Findings: Barriers and Challenges

Published in 2019, the World Rugby Coaching Toolkit included insight and research that highlighted and explained the various reasons for the dearth of women in coaching positions. The findings are not unique to coaching and can also be applied to the under representation of women in leadership roles.

Key Findings: Barriers and Challenges

There are a range of inter-linking challenges that women face in coaching; these are exacerbated at the higher levels of coaching in rugby. These challenges need a holistic and proactive approach in order to increase the number of women coaching in rugby.



What is particularly interesting to note from the above diagram, is that survey responses and interviews gathered through this review presented almost exactly these factors.

In response, it is recommended that statements of commitment to inclusion should come from the Union's leadership accompanied by a commitment to promoting inclusion.

Another practical step to encourage inclusion would be to define and promote the coaching and refereeing pathways for women. Nearly half of survey respondents stated they did not know what these pathways are, with one commenting that "there's a lack of clarity around the pathways for female coaches/referees from engagement to High Performance". The IRFU needs to ensure that IRFU coach/referee education courses are accessible and inclusive and should make concerted efforts to promote these courses to women.

The IRFU held, and promoted, a female referees' day in August 2022 for qualified, affiliated, and prospective referees which was another encouraging step in this direction. In addition, there will be a tutor course targeting this group to raise the number of new female referee tutors and to ensure there are always men and women on refereeing courses. These are positive steps and hopefully those who engage in the days will progress to refereeing and tutoring in the near future.

One other tactic which the IRFU could employ, subject to GDPR, is to directly contact female coaches and referees when relevant courses are being held. Information sent to clubs can sometimes arrive on one desk and not be passed on for a variety of reasons. Speaking directly to women will ensure they receive the information and this will also go a long way to making these coaches and referees feel visible and valued.

Other proposals from survey respondents and interviewees focus on women-only courses. These have proved popular and successful when adopted. That being said, by educating women separately, the opportunity for men to learn from women (and vice versa) is potentially lost. Women need to be visible in coaching and refereeing roles, sharing their unique perspectives with others in order for the cultural norms

that can prevent their progress to change.

Offering women-only alongside mixed courses will appeal to coaches and referees in different ways as some women will only want the former whilst others may prefer the latter.

Keeping an up-to-date register of women coaches and referees will enable the IRFU, in particular the coach and referee development teams, to identify and communicate with them to provide support and monitor progress. These departments, nationally and provincially, play a critical role in making coaching and refereeing more accessible and, with coach numbers rising yet referee numbers some way below target, focused work, including positive action, will help identify, nurture and deploy women in these roles.

Based on the review findings, some of this work to identify and develop coaches and referees is being led by Women's Development Officers (WDO) who are already significantly stretched with participation, clubs, talent, competitions, and leadership responsibilities. Whilst WDOs may support coach and referee development locally, coaching and refereeing departments should lead and be held accountable for meeting revised targets in the Women in Rugby Plan.

3.5.2 Leadership

With the current IRFU Strategy and Women in Rugby Action Plan 2018-23 under review and a revised plan to be developed, now is the ideal time to make a public statement of commitment to women (not just Women's Rugby) and other under-represented groups as leaders in the game.

The IRFU has already achieved the Bronze level of Investors in Diversity, which sets out specific criteria to be met including training for senior staff and committee members. This is a very good start on the journey to becoming a truly inclusive organisation and further steps are recommended in this section to accelerate progress. Executive leadership within the IRFU, through this review and beyond, has been visible and explicit in its commitment to gender parity and greater inclusivity, and these goals should form part of the Union's drive towards continuous improvement and becoming a high performing organisation.



During the course of the interview phase of this report, barriers to inclusion were identified; some of these are barriers of a behavioural nature which reflect broader societal issues whereas others are structural which need to be addressed. There is an overwhelming desire amongst all stakeholders including players and volunteers, commercial partners and investors, to see the IRFU adopt a more proactive and progressive approach to diversity. This commitment must be underpinned by accurate data and insight, including that gathered through this review, that lead to objectives and targets for which relevant departments will be held accountable.

Considering the need to create balanced leadership, Connacht Rugby has, in recent years, taken steps towards skills-based leadership by introducing an application process for committee roles. As demonstrated in sporting and other governance codes and leadership research, this is by far the most effective way to attract and appoint the people needed to lead and make decisions.

Greater transparency, skills focus and diversity on Union committees is not just requested but expected by internal and external stakeholders.

To attract more women to leadership positions, the IRFU will need to take a strategic approach in removing barriers – perceived or actual - to their involvement. Bringing in expertise on diversity and inclusion would be a valuable and positive step, and one of the primary recommendations under this theme is to appoint a Diversity And Inclusion Lead officer. This person would co-ordinate the development on an inclusion strategy and would support committees and departments in implementing the objectives and targets therein. The inclusion strategy should be fully aligned with the IRFU strategy and the Women in Rugby Plan. Promoting inclusion of under-represented groups and tacking behaviours that act as barriers to inclusion, will be at the heart of the inclusion strategy.

A further recommendation is that the current Women's Advisory Group's Terms of Reference and constitution are updated to include Union Committee members as well as independent experts in women's sport who should be appointed through an open process. The Women Advisory Group's primary role would be to drive implementation of the Women in Rugby Plan, supporting and challenging Union committees to embed gender equality in all of their work; and help to facilitate timely implementation on the Women in Rugby Plan.

Theme 4 Recommendations

The recommendations are presented below with an indicative timeline for implementation. In addition, the colour coding suggests where there are opportunities to build on current work fairly quickly or to embark on new opportunities where resource implications may be lower.

- New initiative arising from review
- ◉ Already underway or being reviewed
- ◉ Risk mitigation – act to address issues as soon as practicably possible
- ◉ New opportunities that can be introduced with relatively low resource implications and/or easily controlled by IRFU leads



Theme	Key Recommendations	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026	2026-2027
Enabling Greater Inclusion	Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for Irish Rugby based on sound data and with long-term objectives and targets 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	People <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appoint an IRFU Diversity And Inclusion Lead to co-ordinate implementation of the strategy across all IRFU departments and functions Revise the Terms of Reference of the existing Women’s Advisory Group, to enable the appointment of independent experts and drive implementation of the Women in Rugby plan 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a Women in Rugby network with online and face to face events that facilitate learning and development, peer support and networking 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Systems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure all voluntary leadership positions (IRFU and Provincial) have a role description that sets out the duties, responsibilities and expectations of the position Ensure all executive staff and managers (IRFU and Provincial) are required to deliver diversity and inclusion outcomes through their teams’ work Ensure people responsible for the achievement of girls and women’s objectives and targets, e.g. development staff, are supported and held to account for delivery Ensure IRFU and Provincial policy frameworks are current and actively protect staff and volunteers from abuse and discrimination Create a reporting mechanism for anyone – victim or witness – to safely report discrimination, abuse or harassment Carry out an equality impact review of current criteria for coach and referee education to ensure women are not disproportionately disadvantaged by criteria or standards 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
		--	--	✓	✓	✓
		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
		--	✓	✓	✓	✓

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<p>Programmes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a diversity and inclusion learning and development plan that ensures all IRFU staff and voluntary leadership receive training on diversity, inclusive language and behaviour, and bias • Continue the Spirit of Rugby mentoring and Leadership in Action programmes with a focus on identifying potential women leaders within the game. These should include club and Provincial volunteers, and should also be offered to current international players to create a leadership pipeline • Offer current and former international players discounted or fully funded coach and/or referee education and deploy them to regional centres of excellence as part of the player pathway programme <p>Promotion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue a game-wide statement of zero tolerance to discrimination, harassment, bullying and bias on the basis of gender and other protected characteristics • Disseminate relevant policies to all clubs and ensure reporting processes are clearly communicated across the game • Build into the club guidance resource the business case for balanced and diverse leadership, encouraging clubs to appoint men and women to committees • Develop, in consultation with the new Diversity and Inclusion lead, guidelines that ensures all IRFU materials promote diversity and inclusion; these should include coaching, officiating and volunteering materials 	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	--	✓	✓	✓	✓
	--	✓	✓	✓	✓

All recommendations will be subject to full costing and funding availability. The timelines against each recommendation are indicative.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the IRFU has made considerable progress in key areas such as girls' engagement and participation, and taking gradual steps towards a more gender-balanced Committee. It is acknowledged that some of the tasks and activities listed under the key recommendations set out in the report are already underway or in development. Nonetheless, the need for a co-ordinated, consistent and collaborative approach to women in rugby, led by the IRFU, will ensure this good work can be replicated and scaled up.

The passion and commitment displayed by contributors to this review is a credit to the game and the Union. It was said on numerous occasions how valuable and hard working Irish Rugby volunteers are, and that the game would not be possible without them.

At no previous time has women's sport been so visible or valuable, and this review presents the perfect opportunity for the IRFU to build on its successes, address its principal risks and create a vibrant, inclusive game for girls and women which will eventually pay returns in participation numbers, brand value, performance and commercial investment.



RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS



Appendix 1

The table below sets out specific resource implications for the IRFU as it implements the recommendations over the course of the next Women in Rugby Plan. The focus is on recommendations with specified people, or human resource, requirements.

Theme	Key Recommendations	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026	2026-2027
Increasing Engagement and Participation – Widening the Talent Pool	<p>People</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure the game development workforce has the capacity to meet rising demand for engagement and participation programmes in schools and clubs Ensure a minimum of 4 Women’s Development Officers are supported by a minimum of 4 Participation Officers in each Province 	Explore and plan for increase in development workforce	Ensure a minimum of 4 Women’s Development Officers are supported by a minimum of 4 Participation Officers in each Province	Further expand development workforce as demand requires	Maintain or expand development workforce to meet demand	Maintain or expand development workforce to meet demand

Notes

Participation Officers to focus on schools and college development and connecting players to clubs, aligning activities with WDOs. WDOs to focus on club and team development, connecting talented players to regional centres, aligning activities with Talent/Pathway Officers.

Theme	Key Recommendations	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026	2026-2027
Aligning Domestic Game and High Performance Pathways	<p>People</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appoint (through an open process) at least 2 Pathway/Talent Officers per Province to co-ordinate player identification and pathway provision (2022-23) This should increase to 1 Pathway Development Manager and sufficient Pathway Officers per province as soon as is practicable to manage growth 	Minimum 2 Athletic Dev / Talent Coaches per Province	Maintain or expand pathway workforce to meet demand	Minimum 1 Pathway/ Talent Manager and 2 Pathway/ Talent Officers per Province	Maintain or expand pathway workforce to meet demand	Maintain or expand pathway workforce to meet demand
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruit (through an open process) and develop coaches, sports science and medicine, and lifestyle specialists of the requisite level and quality to deliver each component of the regional programme 	Minimum 1 Head Coach, 1 Assistant Coach and 1 S&C lead to deliver to each age group	In addition to 2022-23 coaching and S&C, add medical, nutrition and lifestyle support personnel	Maintain pathway programme support team across U16, U18 and senior groups	Maintain pathway programme support team across U16, U18 and senior groups	Maintain pathway programme support team across U16, U18 and senior groups
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working collaboratively, Provincial development staff and Talent Officers to identify female coaches with potential to progress These should be offered Coach Development Experience and deployed to regional programmes to develop their skills and experience participation programmes in schools and clubs 		Minimum 1 traineeship per age group offered to a female coach	Minimum 1 traineeship per age group offered to a female coach	Minimum 1 traineeship per age group offered to a female coach	Minimum 1 traineeship per age group offered to a female coach groups

Notes

Talent/Pathway roles include the establishment and running of regional centres providing programme support to U16s, U18s and senior players. Regional coaches and support staff can be appointed on contract/sessional basis

and may work with more than one squad. Internship remuneration should be a minimum of expenses paid. Provincial Coach Development Officers to align activities with WDOs and Pathway/Talent Officers to ensure smooth transition from school/club to region for developing female coaches.

Theme	Key Recommendations	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026	2026-2027
Creating Optimum Competition Structures	<p>Interprovincial Competition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruit and deploy coaches and support personnel with the requisite qualifications and experience to support Provincial squads. A minimum of one suitably qualified female coach to be allocated to each Provincial squad from 2023-24 	Minimum 1 Head Coach, 1 Assistant Coach and 1 S&C lead to deliver to each age group	Identify and deploy at least 1 suitably qualified female coach to each Provincial squad			

Notes

Provincial coaches and support staff can be appointed on contract/sessional basis and may work with more than one squad.



Theme	Key Recommendations	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026	2026-2027
Enabling Greater Inclusion	<p>People</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appoint an IRFU Diversity And Inclusion Lead to co-ordinate implementation of the strategy across all IRFU departments and functions 	Appointment IRFU Diversity And Inclusion Lead officer	Maintain IRFU Diversity And Inclusion Lead officer	Appoint either: a) 4 Provincial Diversity And Inclusion Lead officers	Maintain dedicated Diversity and Inclusion workforce	Maintain dedicated Diversity and Inclusion workforce
	<p>Programmes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue the Spirit of Rugby mentoring and Leadership in Action programmes with a focus on identifying women within the game. These might include club and Provincial volunteers and should also be offered to current international players to create a leadership pipeline Offer current and former international players discounted or fully funded coach and/or referee education and deploy them to regional centres of excellence as part of the player pathway programme 	<p>Continue current leadership programmes</p> <p>Retired players to be offered fully funded/subsidised coach and/or referee courses</p>	<p>Expand leadership programmes to past and current players</p> <p>Once qualified, coaches/referees to be deployed to regional centres</p> <p>Current players to be offered fully funded/subsidised coach and/or referee courses</p>	<p>b) 2 additional IRFU lead officers working directly with Provinces</p> <p>Maintain leadership programme based on annual leadership diversity audit and programme impact review</p> <p>Once qualified, coaches/referees to be deployed to regional centres</p> <p>Options to deploy to Provincial squads</p>	<p>Maintain leadership programme based on annual leadership diversity audit and programme impact review</p> <p>Once qualified, coaches/referees to be deployed to regional centres</p> <p>Options to deploy to Provincial squads</p>	<p>Maintain leadership programme based on annual leadership diversity audit and programme impact review</p> <p>Once qualified, coaches/referees to be deployed to regional centres</p> <p>Options to deploy to Provincial squads</p>

Notes

Players who achieve coaching qualifications should be linked to Coach Development Officers for continuous support, and then connected to Pathway/Talent Officers for deployment at regional centres of excellence.





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