



# ECCLES RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB

Founded 1897

## 2021/2022 AGM CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Although this season has certainly had its challenges on and off the pitch, we can safely say it's been more satisfying and more successful than we might have expected, given the significant impact of the Covid disruption which suspended rugby for the best part of 2 years.

Returning to activity last summer with the July Junior Barbarian event and then the August Beer Festival and 100 Years of Hoops Tournament, it was evident that the club's spirit had survived intact.

Our buzzing Minis section was reporting big recruitment numbers, with young players and parents eager to embrace sport and socialising once again. However, as the September fixtures began it became clear that player numbers had declined in our Senior and Youth teams and attention to this situation would be required to ensure a secure future for the club.

Eccles is not alone in suffering a loss of adult players and struggling to field teams on a weekly basis. The vast majority of community clubs in Lancashire report exactly the same situation. A typical weekend in the North West this season would see as many as 15 fixtures cancelled due to a lack of players.

Research shows there has been a steady decline in adults playing Rugby Union regularly in England, from 259,600 in 2016 to 195,300 in 2020. Since the arrival of COVID this decline has accelerated to just 95,100 adults playing regularly in May 2021. That's a loss of almost 165,000 adult players to the game over 5 years - an average 33,000 players lost each year!

England now has fewer participating adult players than South Africa and France.

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There are more young kids taking up Rugby than ever before but there are fewer youths and adults persevering with the game.

The pool of committed active adult players is shrinking every year and is something the club must adjust to.

Eccles RFC is located in a sports-saturated district and to attract players, members, supporters and sponsors we must compete against several Rugby Union and Rugby League clubs on our doorstep.

The pandemic has heightened the need for the club to define its purpose and reason for existence. Promoting its activities, facilities and achievements is now an essential aspect of club operations. Gaining attention, winning recognition, generating pride and presenting a distinct identity and values, are crucial to the club's survival.

The game has changed. Life has changed. The club has to change. The club must grow and move forward, it can not stand still as our competitors leave us behind.

**If Eccles RFC is to thrive and be fit for the future it must develop its facilities, evolve its activities and improve the rugby experience it offers so they are attractive to the new rugby audience.**

Change will take time to implement and complete if it is to be done right, but the good news is the process of development has already begun and members will begin to see more evidence next season.

Whilst change is necessary, it is important that the club continues to value and promote two principles we believe to be at the heart of what we stand for:



## “RUGBY FOR ALL”

We believe rugby is an inclusive game for all shapes and sizes with a position for everyone. Regardless of ability, experience, age, gender or social status you'll be welcomed at Eccles. We believe in a one-club ethos and our navy & white hoops are a symbol of the bond we share.

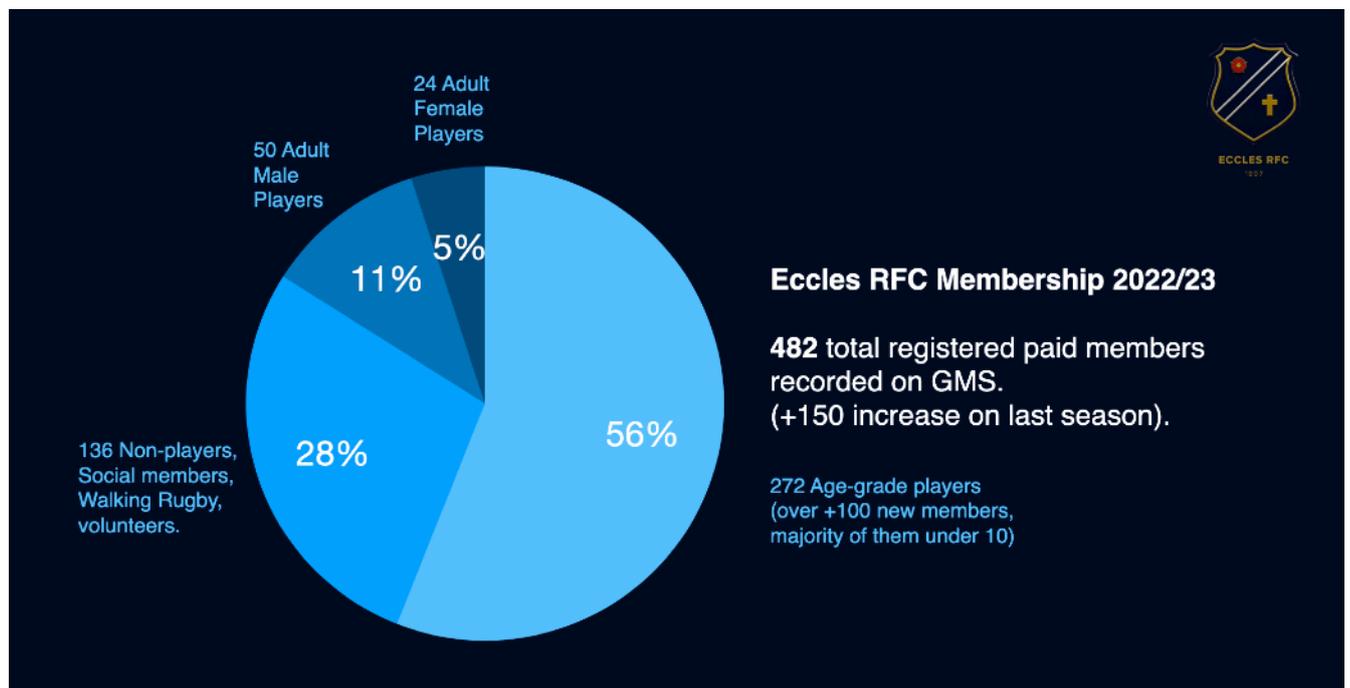
## “HOME GROWN”

We believe in encouraging and nurturing local talent. We breed our players and we celebrate our Juniors who make the transition to pull on the Senior shirt. Eccles is an ambitious and progressive community club. We look to future growth but we don't forget our roots. We take pride in our club history.

These principles set Eccles RFC apart and will be the foundation for the club's exciting future growth - growth that I believe is possible because of the tremendous effort put into the ground work this season.

## MEMBERSHIP

This season the club has increased membership to **482**, the greatest boost being amongst age-grade players who now represent 56% (272) of membership. 11% (50) are adult male players, 5% (24) are adult female players and 28% (136) adult non-player, social or walking rugby members.





## **RUGBY**

### **Mini & Junior Rugby**

I'd like to congratulate Dan Nicholls and his team on their successful return to rugby and their prolific growth this season. As neighbouring clubs have folded their M&J operations, the personal effort of our volunteers, positive word of mouth and social media buzz have all contributed to the increased numbers and enthusiasm at Eccles.

Sponsorship and the new 'one-club' membership fee for all players helped to provide new 'DofE' match shirts for all our age-grade teams, which has been a dazzling sight to see on Sundays with 100s of children proudly playing in matching Eccles hoops. We can also take pride in the regular appearance of our Juniors at Sale Sharks match days, further increasing club exposure.

The appointment of James Wright as CRC supported by Dan Aspinall has certainly improved connections with our local high schools and the Eccles Rugby Schools Union initiative has done a great job in both promoting Rugby Union to youths in our community and introducing them to the club with Wednesday afternoon fixtures.

Rugby League will continue to compete for our Junior players and the club can not afford to adopt a passive attitude. Fulfilling fixtures has become a big problem when facing the spring exodus to the other code and M&J Fixture Secretary Leeann Aspinall deserves praise and recognition for calmly dealing with the weekly headaches. Next season we hope our proposed 'Red Rose Championship' will provide an attractive alternative to help us retain the juniors that one day will be our senior players.

Speaking of which, our U16s enjoyed a very good season with 13 victories, 8 players selected for Lancashire, 1 player selected for the Sale Sharks Academy and 1 player selected for England U16 RL. We expect a number of these talented players to depart next season but the remaining lads will combine with the U17s to form a U18 Senior Colts with a competitive squad of approx 30 players which, if we can retain them, bodes well for a future #homegrown 1XV.

The M&Js have been a big success story this season. There is still much work to be done but we are on our way to building the future of the club. .



## **Mens & Colts Rugby**

I'd like to congratulate Director of Rugby Sam Simpson, Coach Andrew Selby, Captain James Wright and the Senior players on their achievement in winning the Lancashire Plate trophy. It's been a demanding season for the Men and it was very satisfying to end the campaign not only celebrating and smiling, but doing it with a 1XV squad that featured 17 homegrown players.

Player availability and injury has made fielding weekly competitive teams a very difficult task this season. The club has a large pool of Senior players to call upon but the stats show that less than half of them have returned to playing regularly post COVID and the inconsistent line ups have contributed to inconsistent performances. Low player commitment resulted in the 2XV conceding 3 fixtures this season. However, on a positive note this situation provided the opportunity for a number of former colts to step up to make first team debuts and the Vets team has seen a resurgence.

Looking ahead to next season the Senior section will be aiming for bold growth with 1XV, 2XV and 3XV teams all playing in competitive leagues.

More regular playing opportunities for more players will naturally require improved commitment and structure in the Senior section. A Mens Rugby planning meeting to discuss a strategy for success next season will take place this summer.

## **Ladies & Girls Rugby**

I'd like to congratulate Captain Rowanne Smalley and Head Coach James Wright on the growth and development of Women's and Girl's rugby this season. Prior to Covid the Ladies were in a difficult transitional position with several players departing to play at a higher professional level. With sound planning they have successfully recruited and rebuilt the squad, establishing a productive relationship with Salford University in the process. To achieve Lancashire selection for four Eccles Women this season, in the midst of this development work, deserves applause.



Although the Ladies have been relegated from the Women's Championship North 2, the spirit they have fostered saw them fighting all the way through the season to claim two hard-fought well-earned victories right at the end and I'm sure that brand of tenacity will serve them well when they compete for promotion next season.

I'd like to thank the players for their enthusiastic support in the hosting of events at the club this season and for their continued promotion of the club through their active social media which is appreciated.

The Girls have competed well in tournaments this season. Coaches Glen and Matt deserve credit for their development as these players will no doubt form the homegrown backbone of the Eccles Ladies future success.

## **Events**

The club was invited to host the Lancashire ADM League Shield Final and the prestigious North West Colts League Cup Finals this spring. I'd like to offer sincere thanks to the volunteers whose superb team effort delivered exceptionally successful events, resulting in many compliments from the officials of both competitions, significant positive exposure for the club and some welcomed additional income.

## **VOLUNTEERS**

The club has almost 90 volunteers supporting its activities, two thirds of them regularly engaged in coaching or managing teams. With the assistance of sponsorship the club invested in winter touchline coats for them this season as a gesture of appreciation for their commitment.

The influx of children this season has naturally required the recruitment of more coaches and additional volunteer support with Sunday car park marshalling and kitchen staff. We've also increased the scale of our social events and improved our Saturday match day hospitality. I thank all of those who have stepped forward to help and I encourage you to continue.



I would like it to be noted that many of our volunteers who contribute their time and efforts unpaid to the club, also pay membership fees. It is this kind of support that makes Eccles RFC the club it is.

This season, 18 of our coaches hold a coaching award however 33 are yet to do so. Whilst the club is very fortunate to enjoy such enthusiastic volunteer support, for the benefit of our players, we must encourage and find ways to assist our coaches in achieving their potential and qualifications.

The club's coaching CPD programme this season was well attended and I hope it will make the step towards attending RFU courses less daunting for our volunteers. I've already taken the step of arranging for RFU Kids First Tag and Kids First Contact Courses to be hosted at Eccles in September and October and hope the convenience of this will see a good response from our coaches.

Post COVID the community game has seen a serious shortage of qualified match officials. This season we've made our club facilities available to the North West Federation of Referees to host their training meetings and next season the club will aim to host some Refereeing CPD to encourage and support our own coaches to take up the whistle.

Players, Referees, Pitches and Volunteers are all essential for Rugby to take place. I'd like to extend thanks on behalf of the club, to the Fossils Work Party who continue to keep the grounds and facilities maintained and in great condition. Their devotion to doing the stuff that is often overlooked and taken for granted, is appreciated by the committee and next season they'll be kitted out in new wet weather gear, so the weather will be one less thing they can grumble about!

The club depends on the collective commitment of volunteers and welcomes the efforts and contributions of anyone who shares its values. For anyone interested in helping at the club there is a list of volunteer tasks and vacant roles published on the website.



## **COMMUNITY**

Eccles RFC has played its part in community life for over 125 years, and this season we've continued to welcome local teams, groups, schools and businesses to enjoy our facilities.

Marie's breakfasts are now endorsed by the Eccles Churches Mens Breakfast Group who use the club for their Saturday morning meetings and the Lord Bishop of Manchester can be added alongside the Secretary of State for Defence to the VIP visitors list this season!

The club's 3G artificial pitch has been a significant source of income and local community connection for the club this season and I'd like to thank Club President Mark Dutton for his excellent management of this valuable asset.

As the club goes forward, investment in improving our clubhouse and facilities with a view to attracting new members, players, families and supporters from our local community will be essential to growth and development.

Positioning and promoting Eccles RFC as an inclusive, progressive, ambitious community club and the 'home-grown town team' is central to the future vision.

## **COMMUNICATIONS**

The Website and Social Media continue to be the primary method of communicating with club members and keeping them informed.

The website is our online clubhouse and is updated every week with news and useful detailed information, although few members check it.

Having a strong Social Media presence helps the club to share its daily news, grow its community, increase its visibility, and promote its activities and facilities. Our followers use social media to keep in touch with what's happening at the club.



## Social Media

### @EcclesRugby (main accounts)

June 1 2021 Total followers: 4030

**June 1 2022 Total followers: 5071**

Instagram: 1047 followers

Twitter: 1937 followers

Facebook: 2087 followers (1924 likes).

Fighting back from lockdown, the club's Social Media has experienced good growth this season, surpassing our end of season target of 5000 total followers! That's over 1,000 new followers in a year across all platforms. Although I believed achieving that goal was unrealistic considering the low enthusiasm for senior rugby this season and the erratic calendar of men's fixtures, it appears the Juniors activity has helped to invigorate interest in the club. Our digital content is keeping Eccles RFC in the public eye and regularly out-performing the efforts of Sale FC, Sedgley Park, Stockport, Bolton, Orrell, Manchester and Trafford MV.

Our Mens, Ladies, Colts and Junior Rugby SM have all independently increased their followers too, promoting an active, vibrant image of the club to the outside world. (If I were to include their figures in this report it would easily add another 2,000+ followers to the tally.) Full credit to Naithan, Rachel, Rowanne, James and Will for their efforts in this.

Our M&J content is imaginative and enthusiastic and has played a big part in their success. Next season we'll be looking to improve our Mens engagement with SM to support their recruitment and fixtures.

The colts are leading the way, taking ownership of their own content and this has paid dividends with the RFU interested in supporting their efforts by funding the purchase of a video camera and software to help them.

A digital match programme has been published for every 1XV home fixture, with occasional print editions produced for highlight fixtures this season. However, increasingly late submissions and player commitment has made the publication unsustainable. Next season will probably see a change to a generic full-colour printed item with a simple team sheet paper insert.



## **NEXT SEASON OBJECTIVES**

As the Treasurer's, Secretary's and Rugby reports illustrate, the club is in a good position to progress forward next season.

I believe there are 4 key areas for focus

### **1. Reinvigorate Mens Rugby**

Establish a structure that will encourage participation and sustain growth.

Encourage player involvement in off-pitch activities, Social Media, coaching.

Encourage former players to return (vets and 3XV) Improve retention of colts.

Improve the match day experience for players and supporters.

Secure sponsorship to enable player stash and a new 1XV kit

### **2. Improve and develop club facilities**

Create an environment that members want to spend time in and are proud of.

Implement kitchen and conference room hospitality projects.

Implement outdoor seating and new exterior lighting and signage projects

### **3. Improve volunteer recruitment and recognition**

### **4. Improve local community connections**

Produce pre-season communication promoting facilities, membership, events.

Encourage match day support with incentive programme

Finally, I would like to thank the club's loyal sponsors for their continued and valued contributions. The economic climate is very tough for business and will probably continue to be so for some time. The club could not provide rugby for its community without your support and we appreciate your commitment.

I'd also like to sincerely thank President Mark Dutton, Treasurer Mike Bateman and Andy Brunt, G&P Chair who are stepping down from their roles. They have served the club as loyal players and club officers for many years and the club owes them all a great debt of gratitude for their dedicated commitment and stewardship. I look forward to seeing them continuing their support on the balcony with a well earned pint in their hand.

Chris Gaffey  
Chairman

June 1 2022