

Putting the legacy upfront

The date of the Scottish referendum was also the day that marked one year to go until the start of the Rugby World Cup 2015. The Leisure Review went to Twickenham and spoke exclusively to Steve Grainger, the RFU's rugby development director, about what the tournament will leave behind and why the RFU decided to get their legacy in early.

The date of 18 September was a significant date in many people's calendars but at the Rugby Football Union it meant only one thing: exactly one year to go until England play Fiji at Twickenham to mark the start of the Rugby World Cup 2015.

While the people of Scotland were understandably distracted, everyone at the RFU was clearly focused on what needs to be done over the next twelve months to organise and deliver a competition comprising 20 teams, 48 games, 13 venues and perhaps a million spectators. As with any major event, the Rugby World Cup represents a huge organisational challenge and requires huge investment of resources on the part of the host body. However, as Steve Grainger, RFU rugby development director, explained, it also presents a huge opportunity to everyone looking to promote and develop the game. From this perspective, 31 October will be just as significant as 18 September.

"The key message is that when we get to the final on 31 October 2015 the hard yards start," Grainger said. "We know that during the tournament itself and in the immediate aftermath of the tournament we will get more people into rugby clubs. Whether that's kids, returning adults or spectators, we know that's going to happen so the key questions will be: are they going to come back for a second time? Whether we're going to get them back is dependent on the work we do in advance. Crudely, this means we need the right environment for people to play and the right sort of experience so when they come they will want to stay."

The legacy strategy for RWC 2015 was actually launched on 31 October 2012, three years in advance of the date for the final, and unveiled a focus on seven areas of the game, three of which relate to building capacity and four to increasing participation. Grainger was quick to point out that this seven-point strategy is relatively straight forward but it was the result of months of consultation across the game, asking people to put forward projects that could benefit from the world's biggest rugby tournament coming to England.

"Building capacity is not rocket science," he said. "The first strand is improving facilities, so we're putting £10 million into improving clubs ahead of the tournament. In the first year we've done floodlights, grass pitches and club house improvements. The year we're just coming into we'll be doing social spaces for first time. There'll be 230 or so rugby clubs involved and it's things like improving the bar environment and modernising facilities. There's a huge demand of course but we make sure that there's local level partnership funding so that £10 million invested will probably bring £25 million of improvements.

"The second is around people: coaches, referees and volunteers. So we're trying to make sure we've got more people in the system and use this as opportunity to get more younger volunteers into the sport. There can be quite a big gap in some clubs between players in their late 20s or early 30s and volunteers in their late 50s and early 60s, so we're

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trying to keep people in the game when they stop playing.

“The third area is around schools. We’re getting more state schools that don’t currently play rugby to play rugby, so we’ve set a target of 400 secondary schools by 2015, schools playing rugby that wouldn’t have been had we not been hosting the World Cup. We’ll then continue that to 750 by time the Rugby World Cup starts in 2019, which is a massive increase.”

There are about 3,000 state secondary schools in England and currently about 1,500 do some sort of rugby with only around 750 playing regular rugby. The plan to double this number is based upon establishing links between schools and a local rugby club at the outset, and then making sure that the schools have other schools to play against.

“So we find a rugby club that has the capacity to take more 12- to 18-year-olds and we drill out from the club until we find three schools and then introduce a programme we call All Schools,” Grainger explained. “We’re trying to get over the message that rugby is a game all kids in the school can play and that it’s a game that has an impact on the whole of the school. It’s not just about what happens on the pitch. The core values of the game – teamwork, respect, enjoyment, discipline, sportsmanship – are the same values that most schools would want. We introduce a programme of intervention into the schools – coaching, balls, posts, simple stuff but without it you can’t do it – and the impact is phenomenal. And the beauty of introducing it to three schools at once in the same area is that they’ve got ready-made competition.”

With capacity on the way, the other four strands of the legacy strategy look to participation, starting with encouraging young players to return to the game. The RFU estimates that there might be as many as 330,000 16- to 24-year-olds who used to play the game and might be persuaded back.

“They might have gone to university, got a job or just fallen out of love with the game,” Grainger said. “Rugby is a technically difficult game to introduce but the hard yards have been done with those people so let’s think of ways to get them back. That might be Friday night rugby under lights instead of Saturday or it might be adapted 10-a-side games. It doesn’t really matter.”

Closely linked to this focus on returners comes touch rugby, putting as many rugby balls into as many people’s hands as possible and engaging a new wave of players who might not have grown up with the game. This initiative acknowledges that if you are in your thirties and have never played contact rugby it is unlikely that you are going to start but there are plenty of people who would enjoy this more accessible form of the game.

Next is the theme of cultural engagement, which involves a range of initiatives to get more people talking about rugby and recognising the game’s role in their local communities. Finally there is the RFU’s commitment to helping the spread of the game internationally, which involves English county associations being twinned with overseas countries and arranging visits to share knowledge and experiences. By way of example, Grainger spoke of club officials from the eastern counties of England visiting the Belgian union and hosting return visits at their own clubs.

“It is interesting that the perception here is that we’re giving to Europe,” Grainger said, “but actually we’re learning a lot too. These countries are just beginning with the game so they move quicker than we do. They haven’t got the barriers, some of the regulations and tradition, so they can make things happen more quickly. There’s certainly a lot for us to learn.”

Learning, of course, is the key and Grainger had not long returned from a trip to New Zealand in which he had tried to take as much from the Kiwis' experience as hosts in 2011 as he could. A strong theme of the advice he received was the value of a clear strategic plan for any organisation wanting to deliver a legacy from a major tournament.

"One major lesson that we learned from other major events is not to go off and develop something just around the event," he said. "Don't run a series of initiatives and programmes. Look at your strategic plan and look at how can you turbo-charge that; how can you get to where you want to be more quickly? One of the challenges with a major event is that you can get distracted, so a good analogy is if we are in London and by 2017 we want to be in Leeds, how do we get to Leeds two years sooner than we would otherwise have done? In other words, how do we use the tournament to accelerate what we want to do anyway?"

In the modern sporting environment it seems that most of the numbers relating to the finances of the game have millions attached to them and this is particularly evident when considering the financial commitment for major events. Any governing body working on an undertaking of this scale has to strike a balance between the resources available and the aspirations for an impact on the domestic game. Grainger agreed but explained that while things such as facility schemes might need to be heavily resourced, the core elements of a governing body's work – the development of coaches, referees and volunteers, for example – require a lot less investment because that is part of the organisation's day-to-day work.

"It's a matter of profiling and using the tournament as an opportunity to lever things like that," he said. "I would say leadership, clarity of focus and setting out a plan are key. Will everybody agree with your plan? Of course not. Will the majority say they can see a clear plan and we're going to follow it? Yes. And that's probably the most important thing. In terms of staffing and people time, because we followed the direction of our strategic plan our staff and volunteers were already working in that direction anyway. This is really turbo-charging that, so there's no big diversion.

"The other thing we've done with funding is to commit the money upfront that normally would be invested afterwards. There's no point saying, 'We'll make a surplus on the tournament and we'll invest that in 2016/17.' That's too late. We've committed reserves so we can invest during the three years in advance of the tournament."

It is a bold strategy but one that the RFU board was able to commit to from the outset. One of the analogies used to argue the case was that you would not wait until after the tournament to commit the funds required to upgrade the Twickenham stadium for the final. The board heard that the same principle applies to the development of the game and they were able to see the value of this approach.

While Grainger was pleased that the board got behind this aspect of the development strategy, he admitted that it does put him and his team under some pressure. "Oh yes, we've got to deliver," he laughed. "But arguably the easiest thing in the world is when you haven't got any money behind you because then you've got an excuse. We have got money behind us and we have to make sure that every penny of that goes to the right place and delivers a return for rugby. And it's right that we should be held accountable for that."

While the Scottish referendum may have overshadowed the RFU efforts to mark twelve months until the start of the tournament, other landmarks will be coming along quickly enough.

"The important one is a year to go to the final," Grainger said. "From a

legacy point of view, we've focused on end of the tournament – the final – rather than the start because for us that's where the work starts. So that's 31 Oct 2015, when we hope England will have beaten NZ in the final, and then the Monday morning, the Tuesday, Wednesday and the next Saturday are when the real hard work starts. The day after the final is when somebody makes their first judgement about whether there's any legacy as a result of this. Whether there are more people in the facilities a year later than there were a year ago is what we'll be ultimately judged on."

The conversation paused for moment as we considered the magnitude of the task and the enormity of the prospect of falling short.

Grainger broke the silence with a laugh: "It's exciting stuff, isn't it!"

It is certainly that and, with the clock ticking, it gets more exciting for the RFU every day. Monday 1 November 2015, here we come.

The Leisure Review, October 2014

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