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Good afternoon,

Please accept my apologies for the delay in announcing progression under the terms of the RFL's Action Plan and for the length of this communication. As I am sure you can appreciate there has been a lot of new information to consider this week and a need to consult with various key stakeholders including DCMS and Sport England. It was also necessary to give the RFL Board an opportunity to consider recent developments and ultimately approve further progression.

Since the last stepped progression, which was introduced on the 7<sup>th</sup> September, the wider public health situation has deteriorated, and it is against this background the latest review has taken place.

I thought it would be useful to share the key principles and considerations that have guided decision making throughout the return to play process. These include:

#### **Government Guidelines and legislation**

Since the onset of the pandemic we have consistently adhered to Government guidance and since the last stepped progression, the Government has introduced new regulations. With effect from 7<sup>th</sup> September the Government introduced a new law which states that social gatherings of more than six people will be illegal in England. The Government subsequently confirmed that team sports such as rugby league, with an approved action plan in place, are an **exception** to the regulations on social gatherings. A series of further restrictions were announced by Government at the beginning of this week. Whilst the "Rule of Six" now applies to indoor team sports it will still be possible for larger groups to take part in organised team sports outdoors. This reflects the widely held view that the virus is more easily transmitted when in enclosed areas. Generally, the risk of contracting the virus is considerably lower when outside.

The Government continues to recognise the vital role team sports can play in improving physical and mental health. Whilst we must continue to be mindful of the potential impact of Covid-19, as a national governing body of a leading sport, we also have to take into account the hugely positive role sport plays in keeping participants physically and mentally fit which becomes even more significant during a pandemic.

The delivery of activity must be as safe as possible and in accordance with the Return to Recreational Team Sports Framework and sport specific Action Plan. It is important to note that it is acknowledged that risk in sports including rugby league cannot be completely eradicated but can be reduced and the benefits of team sports enjoyed fully again. This is reflected in it being the choice of both the club and the individual participant as to whether to opt into activity.



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## Local restrictions

The powers around local restrictions lie with local authorities. Unless local restrictions specifically restrict team sports then activity can continue in accordance with the Action Plan. There are currently no restrictions on activity itself but there are on overall numbers that can attend including spectators. Even in areas such as the North East where grassroots sport has been specifically linked to a rise in coronavirus cases no attempts have been made to restrict the activity, rather the focus has been restricting the gathering of people and behaviours around the event. This reflects the view that outdoor sporting activity is not driving an increase in infection rates.

## Prevalence of Covid-19 in the community

The approved Rugby League Action Plan and risk mitigation recognises that activity may need to be adapted or curtailed if the community prevalence of Covid-19 dictates or it becomes apparent that a specific sport carries a high level of transmission risk.

In terms of prevalence in the community, there is increasing concern over a rise in infections. Whilst rugby league includes increased risk activity there is no evidence to suggest rugby league activity should be stopped based on the games and activity that has taken place thus. There is no evidence community rugby league is contributing to a rise in infections.

Whilst consideration needs to be given as to whether it is appropriate to continue existing activity that needs to be balanced against moving in isolation from other sports without directives from national or local government. That may give the impression there is more risk within the sport than the evidence currently suggests with potentially long-term detrimental impact.

That needs to be further balanced against the public perception of continuing activity at this time, with the increased risk of a spike connected to rugby league even if not directly connect to rugby league activity.

## Prevalence of Covid-19 in Rugby League environments

Whilst the prevalence of Covid-19 in the community is clearly significant, of more significance is the prevalence of Covid-19 in our rugby league teams and clubs. In considering this we look at three key areas which are whether Covid-19 is entering teams, spreading within teams and between teams.

*Entering the environment-* As expected given the growing prevalence of Covid-19 in the community we are seeing positive Covid-19 cases reported through Club Covid-19 Officers. In total twenty-seven positive cases have been reported to the RFL and NHS Test and Trace since mid-July. These infections are not thought to be linked to rugby league activity

*Spreading within the environment* – Whilst we have investigated several potential outbreaks further enquires have confirmed reasons for further infections are not thought to be linked to rugby league activity.

*Spreading between environments* – Will only become a factor once games recommence.

There is clearly a need to ensure there is no adverse consequence from each phased introduction of contact ahead of any potential reintroduction of games. There have been 18 days since controlled medium risk contact was introduced and there have been no spikes or



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outbreaks. Similarly, whilst the amount of contact activity has been phased, spread can always occur if participants do not adhere to social distancing guidelines. We have yet to see any infections linked to failure to comply with social distancing guidelines on or off the pitch which is encouraging.

The RFL Sub-Group with responsibility for authorising the next stepped progression i.e. the introduction of controlled full contact in a training setting met on Monday morning. Considering the wider public health situation together with the expectation of further announcements no final decision was taken. The Sub-Group took the view that given recent events it was appropriate for the RFL Board to consider whether activity should continue in 2020 and whether additional mitigation measures to those already set out in the Action Plan were necessary.

Having given the matter further consideration, the following additional mitigation measures were recommended to the RFL Board:

**Limit game activity during October and November to youth and junior age groups.** The rationale for this is as follows: -

- It is easier and safer to control and limit spectators which will be limited to one parent/guardian during Oct/Nov with no activity planned for December. Whilst based on the evidence so far, we are confident activity on the pitch is safe we are mindful that social distancing needs to be maintained around the activity and in clubhouses etc. This can become more challenging with open age games, around which there is often more socialising.
- Younger players are more amenable to the turn up play and go home philosophy than older players who see after match socialising as a more significant part of the match day experience. Socialising around sporting activity rather than the activity itself has led to several outbreaks in other sports.
- Greater concern around young adults in terms of infection rates. Young adults form a significant proportion of our open age players.
- Youth and Junior games are usually less intensive and of shorter duration than open age games.

We are considering piloting a small number of open age games which will allow us to work closely with the clubs involved to ensure the correct standards are maintained but will allow us to continue to take learnings during the October/November period and aid the preparations for a potential open age return in January 2021.

**Fortnightly fixtures.** The rationale for this is as follows: -

- It will be easier and safer to deal with players having to isolate and reduce risk of infection.
- Ease pressure on facilities and ensure they remain Covid-19 secure.
- By playing fortnightly there will be a maximum of four playing opportunities before the December break at which point activity will be reviewed.
- Allow clubs to train on alternative weekends when winter training facilities are scarce and indoor facilities are not available.



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**The RFL Board met Tuesday evening and approved the continued phased introduction of controlled contact within a training environment for all age groups with effect from 28<sup>th</sup> September and (subject to a further review at the beginning of October) a maximum of four fortnightly playing opportunities for youth and junior age groups commencing 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> October.**

Whilst we had significantly less percentage of open age sides returning compared with youth and junior teams, we recognise that for some players teams and clubs this decision will come as a disappointment. We are also acutely aware that it is often open age games and activity that drives much needed revenues into clubs. Whilst for the reasons set out above it is not considered appropriate to allow the return of open age activity during October and November. The expectation is they will be able to return in January 2021.

Whilst it is natural to consider activity in terms of the 2020 and 2021 seasons the likelihood is the six month period between October 2020 and March 2021 inclusive will continue to be significantly impacted by Covid-19 with the activity taking place in in the first quarter of 2021 being a continuation of the activity which has started in October and November 2020 with similar restrictions and protocols in place. Subject of course to the wider health situation, the intention is to continue to provide playing opportunities for all age groups throughout January, February and March, with the expectation that League activity can recommence from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021, after the clocks have gone forward. This is one month later than originally envisaged within the Action Plan and we will continue to work with the various leagues and competitions to assess the impact of this and appropriate delivery during the October 2020 to March 2021 period.

Inevitably delivering sporting activity safely during such challenging times means stringent protocols and guidance will need to be in place. Clubs will be familiar with some already but in other cases they will be new. Over the next few days, we will be releasing the following information:

- Test and Trace Protocol and flowchart
- COVID-19 First Aid Guidelines. As you would expect these are quite comprehensive and like those used in grassroots football. We are grateful to the FA for their assistance in producing these.
- Guidelines around the admittance of spectators

Once clubs have had the opportunity to read through all the updated guidance we will seek confirmation once again which clubs wish to take part in the Autumn activity and liaise with the leagues and Foundations who are working with us to deliver that activity.

Finally, we will issue Stage 4 Step 4 coaching cards and infographics on Monday with such activity approved from the 28<sup>th</sup> of September.

I appreciate there is a considerable amount of information to digest and many of you will have questions. The team will continue to pick up any questions raised through the Club Leaders section on OurLearning Zone or alternatively please send any queries through to the usual email address [competitions@rfl.uk.com](mailto:competitions@rfl.uk.com).

These remain incredibly challenging times for the sport. Our CEO Ralph Rimmer has been at the forefront of discussions with Government this week to try and secure additional support for all three tiers of our sport including community. This lobbying for additional support includes



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sector specific employment support and extension of business rates relief. We are also hopeful we can announce some additional grant funding support which will benefit significant numbers of our clubs in the very near future.

Kind Regards

Marc Lovering  
**Director of Participation and Development**

Cc Community Board Members  
Community Leagues  
Community Clubs  
Foundations



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