



FULL REPORT

Fan Engagement Practices in the Professional English Rugby League Pyramid



July 2026

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About Think Fan Engagement (TFE)

TFE was founded by Kevin Rye, an expert in Fan Engagement who has since 2001 worked across football with fans, their representatives, clubs, leagues, governing bodies & other stakeholders in football and sport across the UK, Europe & the World.

TFE empowers clubs to build meaningful fan relationships, and also works with others, including rights holders (leagues, associations), brands and other organisations who seek to understand fans better.

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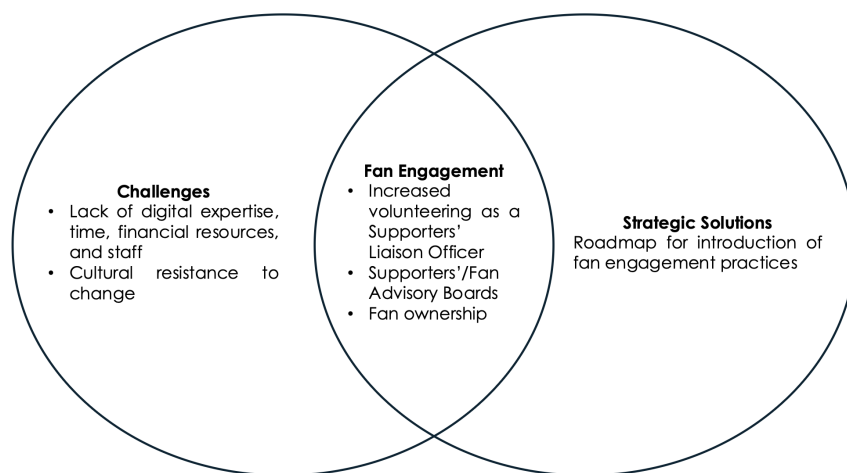
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Executive summary

This paper explores the evolution of fan engagement across the rugby league pyramid in England. While the sport benefits from strong historical ties with a specific segment of the public, clubs must increasingly look beyond their traditional base and recognise the need to strengthen their relevance and connection within their communities. Moreover, rising competition from more commercially dominant sports, particularly football, further reinforces the need for rugby league to create its own niche.

It is therefore crucial to examine how fan engagement can evolve by analysing current practices and mechanisms, as well as their ability to raise greater awareness of transparency, governance, and stakeholder involvement in rugby league. These approaches range from consultations with fan groups on branding matters to more in-depth participation in operational and business-related decision-making.

Figure 1 – The role of Fan Engagement in bridging structural barriers in rugby league.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

The current scenario across the sport reflects how the prevailing top-down governance model limits more progressive approaches such as fan ownership. It is important, therefore, to establish a preliminary understanding of the context by assessing existing practices already embedded within the game. Only then can meaningful and necessary steps forward be considered, aiming to enhance community ties and develop more sustainable business models.

Thanks to the analysis of official and up-to-date secondary sources, this research examines the outcomes of current fan engagement practices implemented across the rugby league pyramid. The goal is to present stakeholders in the sector with examples of existing methods that could be adopted to enhance communication, transparency, and consultation with their supporter base (figure 1).

This research should also be read in conjunction with the first edition of the Rugby League Fan Engagement Index, also released in February 2026, and available at fanengagement.net/rugbyleague

NB: this research covers the period before the bankruptcy of Halifax Panthers in February 2026.

Introduction

Fan engagement is about the relationship between a club and its fans. Fans are a stakeholder in their clubs, arguably the most important, and fan engagement is all about how clubs listen and communicate with them. Most importantly, it's about how they are involved in the day-to-day life of the club and decision making (Think Fan Engagement, n.d.).

The above approach is essential to improve the relationship between fans of Rugby League clubs. While our approach has been commonly associated with football, it can and should be applied to other sports. We see this as a way of properly balancing revenue generation and the wellbeing of supporters – who remain the primary financial source for clubs, leagues, and sports organisations.

Rugby league is a sport historically associated with working class communities, particularly, but not exclusively in Lancashire and Yorkshire. It is also played professionally in London, the Midlands, Newcastle and North Wales. There are two French clubs in the Super League – Catalans Dragons, based in Perpignan, and Toulouse Olympique, but for the purposes of this report and the Rugby League Fan Engagement Index this report is published alongside, these clubs are not discussed. This is because they are subject to different legal and regulatory structures outside of the Super League and Rugby rugby league competitions.

Although it benefits from a strong and loyal following, the dominant presence of football in many of these regions has overshadowed the growth and visibility of rugby league. This has made it even more difficult for clubs to establish a clear and distinctive identity. Our previous research - a self-selecting questionnaire responded to by over a thousand fans of rugby league undertaken in 2021, demonstrated that fans are passionate about the sport, but frustrated about the disconnection they feel exists (Think Fan Engagement, 2021).

It is our view that the conditions the sport operates in has resulted in many clubs remaining at a relatively static or limited stage of evolution. These are often reflected in traditional top-down governance systems that distance decision-making from supporters, with limited communication, transparency, inclusion, and consultation on key matters such as club branding or wider business decisions. The survey of rugby league supporters' in 2021 demonstrated a high degree of frustration at the lack of consultation by clubs on issues such as changes of name and identity.

To understand the dynamics of the sport, it is essential to explore its current landscape and identify strategies to reduce the gap between clubs and their supporters. Fan engagement

can be a catalyst for more and positive participation. From this perspective, three key questions arise:

- What has been achieved in recent years in terms of fan engagement?
- How do clubs currently engage with their supporters?
- How can they develop and maintain meaningful dialogue with them?

Several case studies from across the rugby league pyramid demonstrate forward-thinking initiatives and innovative engagement practices that can inspire wider adoption across the sport. These examples highlight both the strengths already present and the opportunities for improvement in clubs' relationships with their fanbase.

Additionally, the overlap with community engagement is a vital component of these efforts. Strong grassroots connections often serve as the most effective link to local supporters. These dynamics drive innovation within club business models, helping clubs adapt more effectively to future challenges, whether regulatory or commercial. Fan engagement is increasingly recognised as a strategic pillar of modern sport. It is not just a tool for short-term promotion or revenue generation, but a structural component that can drive long-term sustainability and growth, while taking into account that clubs remain both culturally and commercially relevant.

Our research approach

This study aims to examine the current conditions of fan engagement in rugby league, focusing on how clubs interact with - and listen - to their supporters, and the methods used to initiate dialogue and maintain ongoing relationships. Community engagement is closely connected with this topic, as clubs often rely on their grassroots connections to build stronger bonds with their audiences – Including through vehicles such as community trusts and other charitable organisations.

To explore these dynamics, our research is based on data gathered from official and up-to-date secondary sources. The use of secondary data is chosen primarily for its objectivity, as well as for its ability to offer a different lens through which to assess the existing landscape and the type of information currently available on fan engagement.

It is therefore crucial to filter verified and up-to-date information published on clubs' official websites and communication channels, while also taking into account the presence of structured groups involved in dialogue with the club such as supporters' trusts. Reviewing such information provides an opportunity for comparative analysis, helping to identify best practices through a cross-club evaluation, considering both geographical and structural factors – such as fan ownership models, urban versus rural contexts, and historical legacy.

The accompanying Fan Engagement Index focuses on the Super League, given its relative development and resources within the sport. However this research also includes examples and successful practices from what were, until the 2026 season, the second and third tiers of the rugby league pyramid. This wider approach guarantees a more comprehensive understanding of current fan engagement efforts, and enables the identification of positive examples and potential role models. These approaches may then be adapted and scaled across the system to strengthen good governance throughout the industry.

As exploratory research, the methodology supports critical reflection on how clubs currently manage their relationships with stakeholders, and how they might include more inclusive and participatory practices within their organisational models. This is particularly relevant in communities where professional sport can be both economically vulnerable and culturally significant. By collecting and disseminating practices already applied within the sports this research aims to make these approaches more familiar and accessible across the rugby league pyramid, supporting future progress and innovation.

1. The state of fan engagement in rugby league

This chapter outlines several case studies from the Super League and the Championship. From this overview, it is possible to understand how different clubs operate in terms of fan engagement and what practices are currently implemented across the various levels of the sport.

As already stated, there are two French clubs in Super League but for the purposes of this report and the Rugby League Fan Engagement Index that this report is published alongside, we do not discuss them. This is because they are subject to different legal and regulatory structures outside of the Super League and Rugby League competitions. For the avoidance of doubt this does not apply to the North Wales Crusaders.

The Super League currently includes twelve teams – set to become fourteen from the 2026 season. Among these clubs, several have developed a range of methods to engage with their supporter base, both through general fan engagement practices, such as dialogue with independent groups, and specialised forms of engagement, for example, initiatives focused on supporters with special needs.

1.1. Dialogue with independent groups

One of the most common communication methods is ‘dialogue’ between clubs and fans, often facilitated by Supporters’ Trusts, supporters’ councils or supporters’ associations (similar to football Fan Advisory Boards (FABs) or Supporters Boards). These usually best operate as formally independent bodies that act as intermediaries between the club and a significant section of the fanbase. Examples of a supporters’ trust in Super League can be found at Warrington Wolves and Salford Red Devils.

Warrington Wolves Supporters’ Trust state, ‘the main aim is to strengthen the bonds between Warrington Wolves and all the people of the Warrington area’. The Salford RLFC Supporters’ Trust ‘focuses on strengthening the voice of Red Devils’ fans in the decision-making process at the Club, as well as the links between the Club, the community game, and the community it serves.’ (Warrington Wolves Supporters’ Trust & SquadBuilder, 2022; Salford Red Devils, 2025b).

The case of Warrington is even more specific and extends to the youth players’ development. As stated on their website, ‘the aim of Warrington Wolves Supporters’ Trust – Squadbuilder (WWST) is to support the development, coaching and promotion of young rugby league players at all levels.’ In fact, the Supporters Trust works ‘closely with Director of

Rugby Gary Chambers, Head of Youth Ryan O'Brien and Wolves Community Foundation General Manager Lee Mitchell' also 'to ensure we invest wisely in support of our young players on their rugby league pathway' (Warrington Wolves, 2025b). It is important to note that it would not normally expected for a supporters' trust to play such a role in the development of players, however supporters' trusts have developed differently in rugby league. It is additionally worth noting that the club also engages in formal and informal dialogue through the trust as well as the wider fanbase.

Dialogue also takes place at other clubs through meetings and fans' forums with supporters' councils, independent supporters' groups, or associations, as is the case with Hull KR, Hull FC, and Huddersfield Giants respectively (Hull Kingston Rovers, 2025b; Hull F.C., 2025e; Huddersfield Giants Supporters Association, 2025).

For example, the Huddersfield Giants Supporters Association states that they 'also act as a conduit between the club and the supporters, by having regular meetings and discussing any issues, thoughts or ideas our members/supporters may have. Whilst we are totally independent of the Huddersfield Giants, we work and liaise closely with the club in order to support both our aims.' (Huddersfield Giants Supporters Association, 2025).

1.2. Initiatives by clubs and awareness towards fans with special needs

Fan engagement is not limited to direct dialogue. Certain clubs have implemented one-way initiatives designed to strengthen their relationship with supporters and respond more effectively to their specific needs.

Matchday and non-matchday practices

For example, Warrington Wolves have recently involved fans in future planning, including a survey aimed at improving the matchday experience and the services provided by the Club (Warrington Wolves, 2025c).

Leeds Rhinos have introduced a Supporters' board that is present at events and on matchdays, offering fans the opportunity to speak directly with board members (Leeds Rhinos, 2024). Similarly, Hull FC operates several initiatives on matchdays: Match Day Volunteers support the fan experience; members of the Independent Supporters' group 'Team FC' liaise with home fans; and the club designates specific Supporter Liaison Officers for away supporters (Hull F.C., 2025d; Hull F.C., 2025b; Hull F.C., 2025a).

Keeping fans informed on logistical and organisational matters is key to ensuring a safe and enjoyable experience across all club touchpoints. For example, Hull KR provides direct contact details via their website, allowing fans to reach out to the club for multiple reasons by creating an accessible and open channel of communication (Hull Kingston Rovers, 2025a). For away matches, Leeds Rhinos publish practical information on their website, including ticket availability, parking, and stadium facilities (figure 2) (Leeds Rhinos, 2025b).

Figure 2 – Information related to an away match at Wakefield Trinity on Leeds Rhinos' website.

RHINOS NETBALL

BETFRED SUPER LEAGUE

Tickets

Shop

Foundation

24 Jul 2025

FAN INFORMATION: Wakefield Trinity

Round 20 kicks off on Thursday night as Leeds Rhinos travel to the DIY Kitchens Stadium to take on Wakefield Trinity in the first game of the round, kick off 8pm.

For fans heading to the DIY Kitchens Stadium, please see the below fan information:

TICKET INFORMATION

Tickets for tonight's game have now **SOLD OUT**. For fans without a ticket, the game will be shown live on Sky Sports Plus channel or via the red button on Sky remotes. BBC Radio Leeds and BBC Radio 5 Live Sports Extra also have full commentary from kick off so you don't miss any of the action if you're out and about.

PARKING

- Unfortunately the club have been informed that car parking, including accessible parking, is now **full** for this game.

Source: (Leeds Rhinos, 2025b).

Sensitivity towards fans with special needs

Several Super League clubs show a strong awareness of accessibility and inclusion. This involves initiatives ranging from ticketing to facilities and maintaining open dialogue with fans with disabilities or special needs.

Some clubs, such as Warrington Wolves, facilitate ticketing for disabled supporters, considering that if 'a helper/carer is required, one can be admitted free on request'. They also allow access for guide dogs and provide match commentary for visually impaired fans (Warrington Wolves, 2025a). Similarly, Salford Red Devils offer 'a complimentary assistant ticket to fans who may need help our stewards cannot provide'. Moreover, they offer 'a 25% reduction on all season tickets to fans certified as either sight impaired (partially sighted) or severely sight impaired (blind)'. Matchday commentary is also available upon request, and the Club welcomes trained assistance animals (Salford Red Devils, 2025a).

These structural and operational perspectives are also perceptible in other strategies. In terms of facilities, Salford Red Devils provide a 'a quiet room for any fans who may benefit

from this during a match' (Salford Red Devils, 2025a). This idea is also applied by Hull FC, which offers a 'Match Day Sensory Room' for those in need (Hull F.C., 2025c). Looking ahead, Warrington Wolves specified how 'whilst designing the new stadium', the Club invited representatives from the 'Warrington Disability Partnership to join our planning group. With their assistance we invited members of the Warrington Disability Forum to review the draft plans of the stadium, this resulted in a variety of recommendations that we included in the final design specification used by our architects and builders.' (Warrington Wolves, 2025a).

Dedicated roles within the clubs also play a critical part in promoting inclusion. For example, Salford Red Devils have a Disability Liaison Officer responsible for delivering and overseeing accessibility strategies and acting as a key contact for those requiring support (Salford Red Devils, 2025a). Equally, Leeds Rhinos have appointed an Accessibility Liaison Officer to strengthen their inclusive approach (Leeds Rhinos, 2025a).

These structural and organisational initiatives reflect a club's willingness to be open and responsive to its supporters – on matchdays and beyond. Publishing relevant, accessible information and supporting dedicated roles contributes to making rugby league more inclusive. Ultimately, this allows positive experiences for supporters, enhances the clubs' reputations, and encourages the creation of well-organised, welcoming matchday environments.

Relevant data is also published annually on the Rugby Football League's (RFL) official website, especially concerning accessibility for disabled fans. In this context, the Rugby Football League plays an important role. The Level Playing Field Annual Fan Survey, published annually provides valuable data regarding disabled fan access and club facilities (The Rugby Football League, 2025a). This suggests that improving communication between governing bodies and clubs represents a necessary starting point for the introduction of future developments in the sport's culture.

1.3. The rest of the pyramid

Until the 2026 season, rugby league's professional structure below the Super League was composed of the Championship (thirteen clubs) and League One, (ten clubs. For). From 2026, League One has been abolished and the Championship expanded to twenty-one teams.

Within this division, several examples suggest how fan engagement strategies can be improved and included in club operations. Recently, some clubs have experimented with different business models, aiming to enhance transparency and develop more open lines of communication with their fanbases.

1.3.1. Fans' Forums in the Championship

As of 2025, there are examples of clubs that have developed their fan engagement. Clubs are beginning to adopt different ideas. For example, the Widnes Vikings' new initiative called the 'Thunderbolt: Fan of the Week', celebrating which is a supporter that stands out for the value they bring to the club and the community through fan groups, volunteering, or other kinds of activities (Widnes Rugby League Club, 2025a; Widnes Rugby League Club, 2025b). This kind of recognition is cost-effective yet impactful as it enhances loyalty and strengthens the emotional bond between club and fans.

However, the main practice related to fan engagement in the Championship is the presence of fans forums. In fact, the Halifax Panthers have hosted 'The Panthers Fans Forum', after fans requested 'more chances to be heard and more direct engagement with the club.' (Halifax Panthers, 2025).¹ A similar initiative has been organised by York RLFC, which included talks about sporting performance, as well as infrastructure and ticketing matters (York RLFC, 2025).

The Sheffield Eagles have taken this idea further by organising 'an open Q&A session' which addressed topics from stadium developments and finances to player recruitment and recent ongoings', providing fans with deeper insight into both sporting and business-related decision behind the club's strategy (Sheffield Eagles, 2025b; Sheffield Eagles, 2025a).

Oldham R.L.F.C. are another club that have decided to develop the practice of a Fans' Forum (Oldham RLFC 1876, 2025a). Alongside these open meetings, the Club launched a survey in 2025 inviting fans to share their experiences at home games at Boundary Park and propose suggestions for improving the Club's fan engagement and increasing matchday attendance (Oldham RLFC 1876, 2025b).

In terms of liaising with groups of supporters, Doncaster R.L.F.C. have an Advisory Board that brings different stakeholders into strategic discussions within the Club, as well as in

¹ Halifax Panthers' fanbase is formally represented by the Halifax RLFC Independent Supporters' Trust, also known as the Fax Trust (Halifax RLFC Independent Supporters Trust, 2020). NB: this research covers the period before the bankruptcy of Halifax Panthers in February 2026.

community engagement matters (Doncaster Rugby League Supporters, 2025). The Midlands Hurricanes also illustrate how engagement strategies can differ depending on available resources. For example, the Midlands Hurricanes Supporters Club gathers feedback and suggestions from its committee and communicates them to the Club. The Supporters Club's goals consist of:

- 'Enhance the game day experience for fans coming to Hurricanes games
- Support the club with fundraising²
- Organise away trips and travel to away game days (through a dedicated WhatsApp group)
- Organise liaison with the club with regular online and face to face forums
- Help develop club ambassadors who will help us grow our fan base and game day attendances' (Midlands Hurricanes RLFC, 2025).

1.3.2. Being a fan-owned club in rugby league: Hunslet R.L.F.C.

Fan ownership represents both a model of fan engagement and an alternative governance model within rugby league. It is a distinct model of its own and bears examination as part of this report. Hunslet R.L.F.C. illustrates how a fan ownership structure can blend fan engagement, a focus on the community and robust governance as fundamental planks of the business model. This is made possible using the 'Community Benefit Society' (CBS), a common model of mutuality that falls under the banner of a 'cooperative'. Although this is uncommon in the professional sport of rugby league, in football it has had significant impact over many years. In tiers 1-6 of English football the model is used by AFC Wimbledon, Exeter City, Chester City, Darlington FC, Hereford FC, Scarborough Athletic FC and Merthyr Town FC.

Although fan-ownership in professional rugby league is rare, Hunslet provides a model that demonstrates the principles of fan engagement extending into the actual ownership,

² It is worth noting that fundraising by supporters' clubs or similar organisations is not what Think Fan Engagement advocates in its concept of 'fan engagement'. Extensive evidence - both anecdotal and in research undertaken by academic research such as Hamil et al (2001) - has demonstrated that this practice creates an unhealthy and sometimes dependent relationship between the club and fans and may shift the focus away from fan engagement as a strategic good for the relationship between fans and the club. If fundraising takes place it should ideally be for equity stakes or similar purposes.

governance and decision-making processes of sports clubs. The ownership model of one member, one vote ensures a direct influence on financial, business, and organisational decisions promotes an approach that means that fan engagement is a fundamental element of the operation of the business, generating long-term legitimacy and effort towards engagement (Hunslet RLFC, 2025a). This is because the CBS in professional sport is itself specifically predicated on the relationship between the club and its fans.

Cases such as Hunslet R.L.F.C. illustrate how a specific model can open the door to alternative scenarios for the future of the sport and suggests that formalised frameworks and league-level guidelines could be beneficial in encouraging dialogue and openness across all tiers.

2. Bridging the gap: considering the advantage and barriers to fan engagement in rugby league

This chapter outlines the common elements identified through the analysis of case studies concerning both the Super League and the Championship. These findings highlight that there is still room for improvement within the rugby league system, especially when considering the presence of barriers that currently hinder the implementation of fan engagement strategies across the sector.

2.1. Similarities in practices

Despite different levels of visibility, budget, and structural development across the rugby league pyramid, several similarities emerge when examining fan engagement practices.

First and foremost, many clubs - and fans - are increasingly recognising the importance of direct and structured dialogue with their supporter base. Although the types vary from independent supporters' trusts for fans of Warrington Wolves and Salford Red Devils, to club established supporters' councils and fans' forums at Hull KR, Halifax Panthers and York RLFC, all of these group structures create a more formal space for feedback, transparency, and consultation.

Similarly, Doncaster R.L.F.C. and Midlands Hurricanes integrate fans representatives into advisory or liaison roles, extending the role of engagement into the club's business development. These initiatives, although limited in number across the industry, often go beyond symbolic consultation. They provide opportunities for discussion on governance, communication, and the matchday experience, and represent a key point towards potential transformation within the game. In the case of Doncaster RLFC it is important to acknowledge its position as part of the overall 'Club Doncaster' group. This includes Doncaster Rovers FC, as well as Doncaster Rovers Belles. Doncaster Rovers FC itself has a well-established set of practices that mean it regularly earns a silver award in the annual Fan Engagement Index for English men's football.

There is also a focus on improving the matchday experience not just from a logistical or entertainment perspective, but also through the integration of volunteer groups, dedicated liaison officers. There are also initiatives that enhance inclusivity, such as sensory rooms or free tickets for carers. Clubs such as Leeds Rhinos, Hull FC, and Salford Red Devils also demonstrate how operational touchpoints can be designed to be more accessible,

considering measures that range from discounted ticketing to the provision of quiet rooms and the accommodation of assistance animals.

Taken together, these examples might lead to a different perception of the term of ‘fan engagement’, but we should be prepared as practitioners to demonstrate some flexibility in order to encourage the overall development of fan engagement to fit the specific sport and its business practices. That is why defining what we mean by fan engagement as ‘[being] about the relationship between a club and its fans. Fans are a stakeholder in their clubs, arguably the most important, and fan engagement is all about how clubs listen and communicate with them. Most importantly, it’s about how they are involved in the day-to-day life of the club and decision making.’ (Think Fan Engagement, n.d.). The examples examined here also underline the need to expand good practice within the sport.

This can help create the foundations that governing bodies and clubs can build on to the benefit of all clubs, especially considering the more limited number of professional clubs that can act as role models, as well as their relative size, resources and turnover, especially compared to, for example, football.

2.2. Barriers to fan engagement implementation

The aspects outlined in the previous chapter demonstrate the potential for developing more structured fan engagement techniques. However, despite the presence of encouraging fan engagement strategies across various levels of the rugby league pyramid, their implementation on a wider scale remains limited. A combination of organisational, cultural, and economic constraints, as well as the lack of standardised guidelines, often still leave clubs limited in their efforts and the transformation of best practices remains isolated.

By operating with limited resources – and in a context where fragmentation in approaches and applications of best practices is significant – it is common to see a gap in which some clubs have managed to develop proactive ideas, while many others still face structural and cultural limitations that obstruct their ability to evolve. This is why, in many cases, engagement remains marginal, reactive, or informal, depending on individual staff or volunteer initiatives rather than a structured policy within the club’s operations.

In fact, clubs often face several barriers, such as limited time, financial, and human resources. This leads a tendency to prioritise short-term operational needs over strategic and long-term initiatives, something we have also commonly seen in football (Rye & Banerji, 2025).

The lack of current strategic expertise, as well as digital know-how or the awareness of digital communication to maintain consistent connection with fans, are other key factors. This is also related to traditional governance structures and risk-averse cultures that may be sceptical over the adoption of innovative practices.

Consulting supporters, introducing inclusive governance, or opening to diverse audiences, requires openness, patience, and an adaptable structure. Additionally, there might not be a routine for gathering feedback, which makes it difficult to assess impact or plan improvements. Consequently, decision-making and communication are often taken unilaterally.

As previously outlined, the RFU as governing body has made efforts in recent years to promote accessibility and community inclusion. However, there is still a lack of support for clubs that wish to implement actual fan engagement strategies in a structured manner.

Without shared frameworks, training opportunities, or benchmarks, it becomes difficult to build a culture in which fan engagement is prioritised. This also limits the potential to reduce inequality across clubs. Recognising these gaps is essential before considering how current or additional best practices can be effectively integrated into business models. The next section builds on this analysis by exploring how clubs can implement fan engagement within their organisational strategies.

3. Business model integration

In the context of rugby league, any proposal for integrating fan engagement into the business models of clubs must consider the barriers and limitations specific to the industry. Each club within the rugby league pyramid operates in a different environment, with different levels of infrastructure and resources. For this reason, starting with a **minimum viable practice** is essential when attempting to introduce fan engagement across the industry.

3.1. The road to fan engagement implementation

This section outlines the steps rugby league clubs can take to introduce fan engagement into their organisational structures. The process begins with the RFL and Super League initiating engagement practices, followed by individual clubs adopting and adapting them according to their local context, integrating fan engagement into their governance and revenue models.

Starting from the League

It is first important to focus on the number of touchpoints between clubs and their fans. The analysis shows that fan engagement strategies – although still limited in terms of variety of practices – are currently being defined or at least encouraged directly by some clubs, particularly through the establishment of supporters' trusts, advisory/supporters' boards and similar bodies and with a focus on facilities' accessibility and engagement with disabled fans.

However, the leagues and governing bodies hold a key role in providing evidence-based data to help justify their further adoption, especially through its annual work on accessibility. We recommend that the dissemination of fan engagement best practices – including those already in place within the rugby league structure – should be done by the RFL & Super League. This means that any structural improvement to fan engagement across the rugby league pyramid would be firstly introduced by clear guidance at the centre.

Adoption at club level

By strengthening the overall environment from the top, the League can incentivise, build trust with, and facilitate adoption by clubs' leadership. The next step involves understanding the local cultural and operational context of each club. This is the reason that touchpoints are relevant. While some clubs already maintain dialogue with independent supporter groups, these practices should be expanded, particularly by clubs that have not yet implemented them. Introducing a network of supporter liaison officers (SLOs), even on a voluntary basis, would be a good starting point. This would help establish a human link

between clubs and their fans, enhancing empathy and familiarity to what the club represents for the local area.

Fan engagement and the revenue model

Transparent and clear dialogue with fans can help to build loyalty, improve retention, and enhance business stability. In order to achieve this, a combination of RFL/league-level encouragement and step-by-step adoption at club level would allow fan engagement practices to align with any cost and resources criteria, but also in terms of community integration. This approach would allow clubs to adapt their internal structures according to guidance, while retaining flexibility to reflect the needs in their local area. This could help to integrate fan engagement as a necessary, strategic function and part of the overall model, instead of a 'nice-to-have' activity.

This idea leads to the third step, where clubs need to explore how to integrate such strategies into their business operations. Fan engagement strategies must be mapped out by identifying all available touchpoints in order to enable future expansion – for example, matchdays, social media platforms, feedback, or direct communication channels. When these touchpoints are strategically identified and effectively managed, they can become the foundation for stronger and more meaningful relationships between the club and its supporters.

3.2. Long-term perspective and growth

As with any organisational practice, it is essential to establish a strategy capable of ensuring consistent execution and regular updates over time. This will support the integration of fan engagement initiatives into the internal structure of clubs.

The aim of building an operational foundation that can generate long-term value should take into account specific elements, including:

- Training and performance indicators to monitor engagement.
- A formal RFL & Super League-wide guidance structuring dialogue between clubs and fans. This could take the form of a regulation as part of the licence conditions for clubs.
- A network for sharing practices across clubs, the League, and supporter-led groups.

3.2.1. Training at League level

The formalisation of processes that help best practice be adaptable depending on the circumstances at each club is vital. Ongoing training and development opportunities for club leadership, staff and volunteers allows collaboration between clubs, facilitates the sharing of knowledge and outcomes, and should be supported by the RFL & Super League.

Further consideration should be given to the variation in context and organisational structure across the pyramid. Resources should be developed that introduce best practice models to clubs and the industry. This concept is in line with the 'Reimagining Rugby League' report by the RFL, which highlights matchday experience and fan engagement as some of the key points for improving the sport's positioning and the visibility (The Rugby Football League, 2022).

Over time, the use of evidence-based reporting and research could lead to the introduction of annual reporting on fan engagement outcomes, further strengthening and expanding awareness of good practice— in a similar way to what is already taking place with accessibility-related matters.

3.2.2. Scaling practices at club level

Integration of fan engagement within the club's strategic plan must be done according to the club's way of operating. Even small-scale actions can be effective if they are structured, practical, and aligned with the club's resources. The goal is to introduce relevant best practices into a suitable format considering the club's reality.

For example, the implementation of low-cost digital tools can act as a starting point for a significant, organic, and scalable implementation of innovative practices within the core business on a daily basis. This then allows the introduction of measurables, tracking information that gives the club useful data aimed at identifying current trends and topics, new supporters' needs and requests, as well as for optimising fan engagement practices with the club's business model.

A note about community engagement

Because of the role they play outside of the weekly fixture schedule, there is also considerable overlap between fan engagement and community engagement in rugby league, as with many other sports (see Think Fan Engagement's recent report, 'Establishing Fan Engagement as a core value in the Football Industry during a New Era of Regulation'). Moreover, considering that fan engagement is about dialogue, governance, and

transparency with a set of stakeholders that constantly engage with the club, it is crucial to leverage local partnerships. Collaboration with local authorities, charities, businesses, sport clubs, and schools does not just deepen local roots, but it brings in new audiences. Community activation can also be treated as a social strategy, avoiding handling fan engagement as merely a marketing exercise and instead enhancing it in the clubs' operational structure.

What this roadmap should do - and what it should not do

This roadmap aims to ensure that fan engagement moves from isolated efforts to a structured and measurable component of club governance, adaptable to different sizes and capacities. The ambition is not to standardise how every club should engage with fans, but rather to offer a structure that respects local identities and capacities while promoting a shared culture of inclusion, dialogue, and transparency within the whole rugby league pyramid.

Conclusion

Running a rugby league club requires a delicate balance. Clubs are resource constrained and good governance is required for fan engagement to work as a fundamental element of the overall business model, especially the importance of revenues generated directly from fans (The Rugby Football League, 2025b). As discussed in the paper, it is important to build on the common ground and existing know-how within the industry.

In fact, the fragmented and restricted set of data regarding engagement strategies across the pyramid is a limitation to this research but also suggests that a more structured and inclusive approach should be fostered. As this research shows, while some clubs are developing promising practices, there is still a gap in terms of innovation, consistency, and wide institutional support. It is also important to understand the intentions behind each club's approach, assessing whether fan engagement practices are genuinely designed to build a direct connection with supporters or rather serve as marketing strategies aimed at increasing revenue.

This paper highlights how the RFL and Super League can be key actors, especially considering regulations, such as the salary cap for Super League clubs. Encouraging the extension of best practices across the pyramid, supporting clubs to evolve beyond the traditional supporter relationships and the introduction of collaborative work that aims to integrate practice into clubs' business models is important so that we do not end up with fan engagement remaining as a marginal concern. It is instead meant to ensure that fan engagement can be developed in clubs' operational and strategic frameworks, moving from separated activities to a more systemic inclusion of supporters in governance and decision-making processes.

Further studies may look at how the introduction of fan engagement practices within clubs' structures evolve over time, particularly in relation to changes in governance models, the overlaps with community work, or future regulatory changes within the sport. Additional research could focus on regional variations – especially in areas where football remains dominant – to understand how rugby league clubs might develop a stronger dialogue, promoting a specific identity that could potentially create a valuable niche.

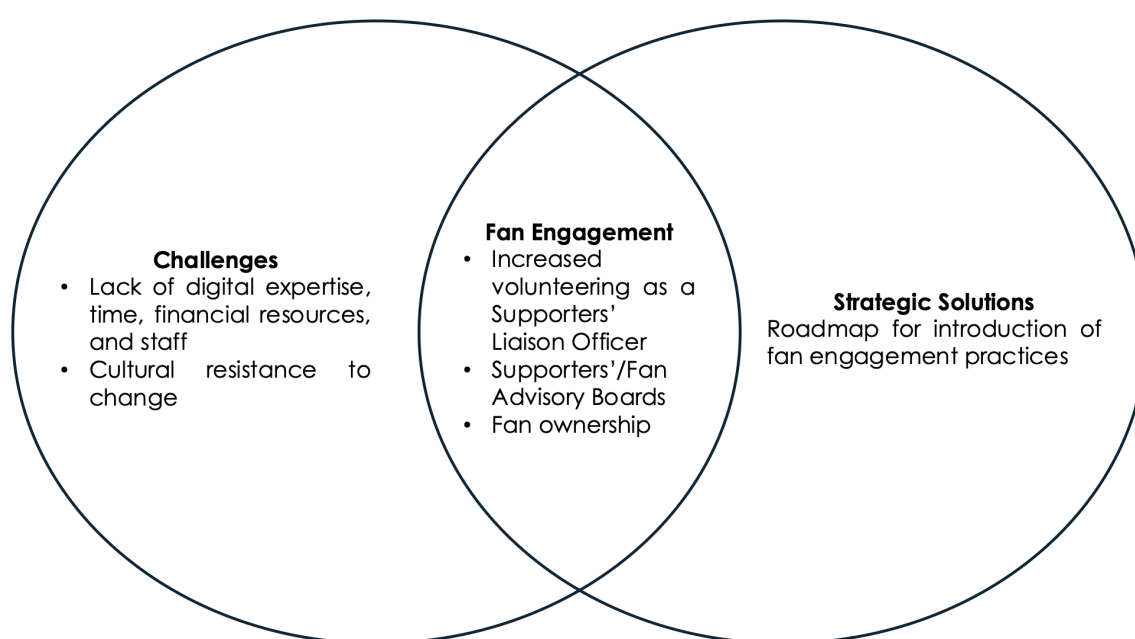
We have already launched the Fan Engagement Index for rugby league in tandem with this report. It is our experience that this set of indicators has framed fan engagement in a way that means that football clubs are now more easily able to adopt improvements to their programmes of fan engagement that have a direct, positive impact structurally and in

delivery and direct impact on fan experience and related areas. We anticipate a similar response in rugby league, and will continue to develop the index to the specific needs of rugby league, as we have done to great effect in English men's football. We will also continue to examine potential independent industry benchmarks in rugby league as we have done in English men's football.

This paper suggests that by clubs building on their existing touchpoints with fans can help them to understand their positioning and consequently try to bridge the gap between current best practices and their integration with their business model. This is especially the case if it is done with support and direction from the RFL & Super League.

In order to bridge the gap between good practice and structural integration, operational barriers such as a lack of time, financial resources, staff, or digital expertise, as well as a cultural resistance to change, must be considered (figure 3).

Figure 3 – The role of Fan Engagement in bridging structural barriers in rugby league.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

The study recognises that fan engagement is not purely about increasing attendance. It is also importantly a tool to improve governance, drive financial sustainability, and tie clubs more deeply to their fans and local communities, making more clubs more robust and able to

withstand shocks and difficulties that are specific to the sport. This report has clarified how engagement is practised, what structural obstacles exist, and how clubs might better integrate these strategies into their overall models.

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