



# Rugby League in West Yorkshire – a future?



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## **Executive Summary**

Does rugby league in West Yorkshire have a future?

Ian Martin argues that it does. In fact, Rugby League should be at the heart of regional democracy and regional democracy should be at the heart of rugby league. But what does that really mean? In this report, he investigates what the founding values of the game might mean today and how those founding values can inspire a future for the game in West Yorkshire and beyond.

Based on that investigation, he defines 5 values for rugby league in West Yorkshire today:

1. Rugby League in West Yorkshire must aim to provide life chances for people here and around the world.
2. Rugby League in West Yorkshire must not just settle for inclusion, it should do something more than that – it should be actively anti-discriminatory.
3. Rugby League in West Yorkshire must always be open to people representing their own sense of belonging, identity and pride.
4. Rugby League in West Yorkshire must always strive to be professional, competitive, sustainable and accountable.
5. Rugby League in West Yorkshire must serve as inspiration for self-determination through regional democracy and vice versa.

Based on these values, his proposals include:

- Paying Women's Super League players as a top priority.
- Supporting Super League's Transatlantic expansion to increase sponsorship income and create more life chances for people growing up in West Yorkshire.
- Devolving power and resources for supporting community ownership of clubs to the West Yorkshire mayor.
- Making Super League clubs more transparent and more accountable, including ethical audits of income and expenditure.
- Ensuring Rugby League in West Yorkshire is actively anti-discriminatory and accountable for taking steps towards under-represented groups, including the South Asian community.
- Encouraging people in rugby league to freely express their identity through international representative teams without prejudice, including a Yorkshire XIII if desired.

## **Introduction:**

This paper is not about the here and now of rugby league in West Yorkshire, it is also not about an easy tomorrow. It is not a fully comprehensive investigation. Particularly in a world changed by Covid and its varied impacts, fine details change quickly. So this is about principles, about broad underlying themes, about ideas that might be a reference point for decisions, a guide to where the longer term vision might be, questions about how we might build rugby league back better. It is a provocation.

But how important is rugby league to West Yorkshire and how important is West Yorkshire to rugby league?

Of the fully professional rugby league clubs in the world, 14% are rooted in West Yorkshire. Of the semi-professional rugby league clubs in RFL (Rugby Football League) competitions, 28% are based in West Yorkshire. Of the 10 clubs currently playing in Women's Super League, 60% are in West Yorkshire. Whilst many of those playing and coaching at those clubs grew up in West Yorkshire, professional clubs across the UK, France, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have also benefited at various times from the playing, coaching and other abilities of people who learned the game in West Yorkshire. Surrounding all of this is an infrastructure of schools, junior clubs, amateur clubs, businesses, media and supporters who are all an essential element of rugby league culture in West Yorkshire.

West Yorkshire has provided and continues to provide rugby league with so much of what makes it work. At the same time, rugby league forms an integral part of its essence. Unlike the vast majority of other sports, rugby league has a defined date, place and reason for its creation. On the 29<sup>th</sup> August 1895, 20 rugby football clubs met at the George Hotel in Huddersfield and formed the Northern Rugby Football Union, which became the Rugby Football League in 1922. Throughout this time, the governing body has been based in Leeds. Of those 20 founding clubs, 10 were based in the central part of the West Riding of Yorkshire that became the metropolitan county of West Yorkshire in 1974. All 20 clubs wanted to be able to make 'broken time' payments to players who had to take time off work to be able to train and play. This was against the rules of the London based Rugby Football Union and effectively discriminated against those who were otherwise unable to afford to take time off work.

West Yorkshire is therefore the birthplace of a sport that has been adopted by people around the world. It gives the area an essential part of its identity and something about which to be proud. In fact, Patrick Skene has described how rugby league people in West Yorkshire (and the North more generally) seem to carry a special pride in their creation and want to share it with the world to the extent that they appear less worried by rugby league people in other parts of the world about letting others thrive within it. (1)

This paper aims to consider some key themes arising from this history and this connection. It will look at what the game's founding values might mean today; it will consider the role of money in the game (particularly in the context of sustainability and corporate social responsibility, including sponsorship and charitable activities); it will consider the relationship with Westminster politics and emerging Regional Democracy; and it will consider inclusion

and identity in the game, including: ideas of West Yorkshire, Yorkshire and the North; civic and post-nationalism; and what a Transatlantic future might mean for rugby league in West Yorkshire.

## **Founding values**

So what is the point of rugby league? What were its founding values and are they enough today to justify its continued importance in West Yorkshire?

It is important not to retrospectively place in people's consciousness, ideas and values that seem more logical with hindsight. The founding values of rugby league meant something specific at its time of birth. West Yorkshire and the world at large are very different places now. It is therefore important to consider what those founding values might mean in today's world without nevertheless claiming that these modern interpretations would have ever crossed the mind of the game's founders.

We do know however that when rugby league was created, it was created by people far away from the dominant national capital of the time. When rugby league was created, it could only happen because people decided to do more than just have a whinge and instead sort things out for themselves. When rugby league was created, it was created to be specifically different from the game that was led by the London based establishment. When rugby league was created, it took steps towards people who might be excluded and did what was necessary to ensure they could be included. When rugby league was created, it was created in dissent. (2)

For some people throughout rugby league's history in West Yorkshire, the game's distinctiveness has been about what happens on the pitch. And there was a time when that might have been obvious. A sport that could only survive by being entertaining enough to get people without lots of money to hand some of it over at the gates. And in doing so, recompense the players for the broken time from their regular job. Often in the same role and location as the fans themselves.

There really was an era of what former Bradford Bulls player and coach Brian Noble called 'the forefront of developing genuine athletes and rules for being entertaining' (3). An attitude in stark contrast with Bertram Fletcher Robinson's 1895 statement that rugby union's gentlemen did not wish to "pander to the howling mob that crowd the circular stands of some Yorkshire coliseum" (4). But that is no longer the case. None of this makes rugby league distinct. There is another code of rugby that now wants people through the gate, that is belatedly paying its players openly and that is regularly changing its rules to try and make it as appealing as possible without actually becoming rugby league.

When former NRL journalist and respected RL internationalist Steve Mascord ran a quick thought experiment on Twitter in late 2019 asking the question, "If rugby league merged with rugby union and the rules were 100 per cent rugby league, would you follow it?". The responses were varied but for many people, including Steve himself, the answer was 'No'. For many people therefore, what makes rugby league distinct is not what happens on the pitch (where it has no control over the evolution of other wealthier sports with stronger establishment, corporate and media relationships) but off the pitch (where being 'like them' has proven less desirable and/or much harder to achieve).

Even more than West Yorkshire, New South Wales and Queensland in Australia are places where rugby league is a widely accepted part of daily life. The founding values of the game created in West Yorkshire have travelled with it and been interpreted for that place. This has been best expressed by the blog Pythago NRL:

"In Australia, NRL (the National Rugby League) should strive to be the national code that represents its citizens as equally as possible. Rugby league is poised to do this in a way that rugby union and AFL (Aussie Rules Football) cannot. The sport has four cultural values to impart:

- Get paid for your labour
- Rugby should be entertaining to watch
- Your class, race, religion, sexuality or other identity won't hold you back if you play well enough
- Represent your people, not the arbitrarily defined country into which you were born

Despite what those on rugby's frontiers in the New World would tell you, these ideas are important. If they weren't, we may as well fold the NRL and get behind the Wallabies (Australia's national rugby union team)." (5)

The Tryline blog has also made the case that it is rugby league's history that sets it apart even though, "We seem to see our image and history as a crutch rather than a unique selling point" (6). This has particularly been the case when rugby league's geographical and class roots are interpreted as limitations and not compatible with a 'progressive' approach to the game's future. For example, Steve Mascord tweeted in September 2018 that, "The real battle is not to change the media's coverage of the game but to reposition it commercially by changing the demographic. Then we attract different investors, the money alters people's behaviours and the perceptions finally shift." (7)

And yet, it was exactly that demographic and those places that stood up for broken time and who welcomed and made into heroes, players like Roy Francis and Clive Sullivan whose careers had been capped by their African heritage in their Welsh birth towns. The people who made these things happen weren't in London, they were here in West Yorkshire and the other industrial Northern towns that sustained the game. Given that many of these towns are now struggling to move forward past the impact of industrial decline, do those areas that sustained rugby league through the dark times not deserve the support of rugby league through their own dark times?

Is it the case that the future of rugby league is one of either consolidation or expansion? If we have to make that decision, we need to understand what those founding values that define our history mean in the context of the world today.

## **Sustainability**

When we talk about the sustainability of rugby league in West Yorkshire, even when we are just talking about the groups of humans that head out onto the pitch to play against each other, the ecosystem is diverse and complex: Men's teams playing at professional, semi-professional and amateur level, Women's teams (who are all currently amateur), Junior teams, Learning Disability teams, Physical Disability teams, Wheelchair teams, Modified contact teams and events (including Masters, Touch, Tag and X) and within that a range of teams playing at different levels, including schools, recreational teams, community clubs, clubs in national/international leagues, local/regional/national amateur representative teams and professional national teams.

The sustainability of rugby league in West Yorkshire is therefore about how each part of this ecosystem can thrive, nevertheless it is also important to acknowledge that the overwhelming majority of people currently employed in rugby league off the pitch are focused on the men's professional game and that is the tier of the game that brings in (and spends) the overwhelming majority of the money. For this reason, this report primarily concentrates on this tier of the game. For example, the current TV contract with Sky is worth approximately £1.8 Million to each Super League club each season. Although Championship clubs occasionally benefit from live coverage of Challenge Cup games on BBC TV (as well as Sky coverage of the Summer Bash in Blackpool) and games involving teams at all levels are often streamed on the Our League website, the BBC website and through club's own websites, the only TV coverage that brings in significant revenue is dependent on Super League teams being shown and it is in that environment where the vast majority of sponsors and advertisers want to be seen.

In a recent report by the Onward think tank, 'A Sporting Chance', they identified that "Rugby league is more reliant on gate receipts and TV income than any other sport" even though "Data on the finances of rugby league clubs is slim and where present, opaque" and referred to the 2011 BBC investigation which found that 11 of the then 14 Super League clubs had a combined debt of £68.5 million" (8) This lack of transparency preventing more detailed analysis was also an issue for the Manchester Metropolitan University researchers in their investigations for the Rugby League Dividend report in 2019, "Nevertheless, for a full assessment of the economic impact, the availability of economic data for all clubs would have been required, which was not possible" (9)

Clearly the international Covid-19 pandemic has added to the complexities for the sustainability of rugby league in West Yorkshire in its broadest sense. One of the first reactions was that Super League gave leave to its member clubs to pay young professionals below the previous minimum threshold (ie. below £15k per year). Despite the broader picture of financial crisis brought about by the impact of Covid, this means that young rugby league players would have been expected to commit their time to RL and yet not be paid enough to live from RL. Subsequently there was also a proposal, initially supported by all the Super League clubs in West Yorkshire, to lower the salary cap for the 2021 season (from the current £2.1 million per club back to the previous 2017 level, £1.825 million, just above its original 1998 level of £1.8M). Following an assertion by players through their trade union, the GMB, that such decisions about the future of the game shouldn't be made without their



involvement, the lower salary cap proposal was dropped for now. Nevertheless, Leeds Rhinos Chief Executive Gary Hetherington told journalist John Davidson that during the pandemic, "Players at all Super League clubs have accepted voluntary salary reductions, in some cases as much as 50%" (10)

This was all in the broader context of the RFL receiving an emergency government loan of £16 million, meaning that rugby league was the first, and possibly the only, sport to receive such support (11). The loan's purpose seems primarily to be in ensuring the sport can survive long enough for Super League to then be able to play behind closed doors and therefore also to fulfil the contract with Sky Sports (in the last year of the current deal and therefore just before renegotiation). Given clubs below Super League do not have to play matches in order to fulfil that TV deal and given how vital matchday income is, most clubs had put players on furlough and signed up to the scheme where government would pay 80% of wages. The fact that this was extended to October 2020 was considered more important to the sustainability of many individual clubs than the loan scheme which many clubs, even in Super League, doubted that they would be able to repay. Wakefield Trinity's Michael Carter, for example, estimated that a game played behind closed doors at Belle Vue would lead to a £60,000 loss for his club (12).

Even though all sports clubs could take advantage of the furlough scheme, the unusual nature of the government's £16 million loan was partially justified on the specifics of professional rugby league's finances. Rugby League's sustainability is primarily based on clubs playing matches against each other whereas in rugby union, clubs are dependent on receiving revenues from international matches. For example, the RFU reported in 2017 that 90% of its revenue comes from 8 England matches at Twickenham stadium (13). Rugby League's sources of income pale in comparison with football, where even teams playing in the second tier have incomes roughly 3 times bigger than those in Super League - Rotherham United's income in football's 2<sup>nd</sup> tier Championship in 2018 was approximately £15 million, almost triple that of Castleford Tigers in RL's top tier Super League (14).

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that Super League's current £2.1 million salary cap is far below that of the NRL in Australia and New Zealand (over £5 million) and that of rugby union's English Premiership (£7 million) (15). Nevertheless, the Deloitte and Touche Comparative Review of Sports Finances in 2002 found that 77% of Super League clubs' income was spent on player wages, compared to 68% for rugby union and 48% for county cricket (16).

But what does this all mean for the sustainability of rugby league in West Yorkshire in the context of the game's founding values?

There should be little doubt that if the previous financial model for rugby league (including salaries at previous levels) is unsustainable in West Yorkshire, reducing expenditure is a proportionate response in order to save clubs and the game as a whole. But if players, especially young players, are being paid at those levels, they need to only be expected to train and play on a part-time basis, as semi-professionals, so that they can earn additional income through other means. In fact, if clubs do eventually start to think that way then it should be an opportunity for clubs to restructure wage bills so that not only are young

professionals part-time but also that women's teams start to get paid for their efforts too, probably also on a semi-professional basis.

The increasing professionalisation of a Women's Super League where players already train and prepare in many cases as if they were semi-professionals should be seen as an opportunity for different sponsorship sources and TV coverage deals. However, as necessary, the founding values of rugby league suggest that just as England Rugby Union keeps its club game going through profits made from matches played at Twickenham (including corporate sponsorship and TV rights), the RFL, Super League and its clubs should use its most profitable activities to support payment to Women's Super League players until it can become sustainable in its own right.

Nevertheless, some clubs may decide in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic that their future is one in which they are playing at a smaller scale, primarily semi-professional. During a recent BBC RL Podcast, Mark Evans, the ex-Melbourne Storm CEO who has actually mostly worked in rugby union, suggested RL's relatively low costs could be an advantage in a future world where there will be fewer businesses willing to pay big money to sustain expensive wage bills but it was nevertheless still possible that some of the smaller Super League clubs plus current full timers in the Championship might revert back to semi-professional (17)

I actually find semi-professional team sport to often be more exciting as the skills of players are less consistently excellent due to fatigue and so there are more mistakes and therefore unpredictable circumstances on the pitch. I would definitely still support rugby league with passion. But I understand that off the pitch it's not just about me (or other committed rugby league supporters) and that a fully semi-professional sport would be unlikely to get the media and sponsorship support it needs to survive (and grow). Such a move would have negative consequences for many individuals (and their families) who earn an income from the game. Ideally therefore, the future is not about either well-funded clubs with large media appeal or about clubs with a close connection to their community. It's about both and about how both those aspects can work together as a whole sport.

Here in West Yorkshire, Hunslet RLFC provide an example of economic and demographic change affecting a club's status. According to rugby league historian, Tony Collins, Hunslet lost over 50% of its population between 1951 and 1981 (18). This reduction in local population had an unsurprising effect on the club. Although the record attendance for the Myrtle and Flame was 24,000 at the old Parkside for a cup match in 1924, the club have been averaging less than a thousand paying supporters per game in recent years at South Leeds Stadium (19).

This is also however an example of the implications of the city region/urban agglomeration model of economic development for rugby league clubs (20). Here in East Leeds, older residents tell me that there used to be a lot of Hunslet supporters locally but today at Selby Road shops, Tesco Seacroft or Cross Gates Arndale, you will see more Leeds Rhinos gear than anything else. At the same time, in the traditionally Castleford supporting villages to the east (such as Kippax and Allerton Bywater), it has become more common to see children turning up to junior rugby league training in Leeds gear. During Leeds' run of success from 2004 – 2017, there were people living in the area who became attracted to the club's success

and style but most Rhinos fans in the villages today are families who have moved out of the city due to the price and availability of new build homes.

Given that successive Westminster governments have prioritised agglomeration, does rugby league need to start thinking about how other sports and places sustain a large number of professional and semi-professional clubs playing the same sport in a large urban area? Football in Hamburg and ice hockey in Sheffield would be two contrasting examples. In those contexts, HSV and Sheffield Steelers are the bigger beasts with long and relatively successful reigns at the top of the sport. FCSP and Sheffield Steeldogs are smaller, generally play at a lower level but have distinct and equally passionate support bases. Nevertheless, as recent derby victories have shown, it is more than possible for FCSP and HSV to compete at the same level, whereas the nature of EIHL and NIHL franchising (without promotion/relegation) in ice hockey mean that Steelers and Steeldogs cannot.

At the moment, Leeds and Hunslet could meet in the league or cup whereas in Australia, thriving Sydney neighbours like Newtown and Souths never could (due to the NRL's exclusive franchising). The question is: who benefits most from that - Newtown or Hunslet? Is there actually a future for rugby league clubs in our evolving conurbations to pitch themselves as the 'alternative' within those urban areas? Would that be more feasible as part of the same elitist league structure or as part of something more down to earth? If agglomeration in West Yorkshire did lead to an economically successful Sydney-style conurbation, could clubs like Hunslet carve out a valuable space in the way that Newtown have as the 'hip, authentic alternative'? Is this a possible, hopeful future for rugby league beyond Coronavirus? We're going to have to be creative.

## **Westminsterism and Regional Democracy**

This moment in time could be a pivotal moment in the evolution of Rugby League's relationship with the establishment in all its forms. RFL CEO Ralph Rimmer's description of the rationale for the government's £16 million loan seemed to give an accurate picture of the game's role and status and was therefore even more fascinating in its implications, "This is confirmation of why rugby league is important – our USP – the sport's significant social impact in northern communities in particular. Rugby league is not a wealthy sport but is rich in the things that matter most – outstanding sporting and life chances in often disadvantaged communities." (21)

There is no doubt that the political schism caused by Brexit gave the Conservative Party a chance to follow in the wake of UKIP and break through during the 2019 General Election in the 'Red Wall' of longstanding Labour voting towns, many of which are RL towns. So called 'Workington Man' towns. This has led to lots of new Tory MPs who want to keep their seats understanding the significance of RL. In fact, one Conservative enthusiastically championing this loan was Jonathan Caine, a Tory baron and Leeds Rhinos fan. Another was Ken Davy, Huddersfield Giants' chairman and unsuccessful Tory candidate for the town in 2019.

For so long, rugby league being tightly bound with working class communities in the post-industrial North has been portrayed as a liability by those who want the game to ape rugby union. And yet the Brexit effect has led to the longstanding party of the establishment recognising exactly that bond as a strength with which to associate. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the £16 million is a tiny amount in comparison with other areas of public spending. In 2017/18, the London mayor's office identified public sector spending on transport in London at £9.1 billion. And therefore in that sense, the loan could be seen as a small gesture towards the North in the hope of buying enough gratitude in order to stave off more serious discontent in the same way that the whole £1.8 billion devolution 'deal' for West Yorkshire is less than a third of that London figure for transport alone.

At the same time, Steve Mascord described the Westminster government's perception of rugby league as "some sort of de facto welfare agency of the north.... it has been typecast by the government as some sort of public asset, like an old bridge or a church - and therefore condemned to act that way". (22)

In the foreword to the Sporting Chance report by Onward, its director Will Tanner wrote, "The Government's majority was built on the back of rugby league and football towns in the North and the Midlands, where sport is not so much entertainment as a religion". This highlights that fundamentally, the loan and rugby league's current favour is actually about a London based political party retaining power in Westminster by winning votes under the First Past The Post system of election in current marginal constituencies. Onward is in fact the think tank who came up with the concept of 'Workington Man' and the RFL itself was actually thanked for its contributions and insight in that same foreword.

The key question is therefore what happens when London based political parties don't need marginal West Yorkshire rugby league constituencies to win Westminster elections anymore? I would argue that interpreting rugby league's founding values for today mean that West

Yorkshire (and other regions) should work actively towards what Same Skies describe as regional democracy so that its future is much less dependent on whether it is noticed and valued in Westminster and much more about taking responsibility here for building something better (23). Nevertheless rugby league should use this rare moment in Westminster's gaze wisely and build for the long term.

The report itself contains some good recommendations for 'stricter financial reporting requirements to improve transparency' and designating grounds as "assets of community value" to 'prevent their sale without first consulting the local community'. It also recommends that the Government should support more clubs to become community-owned, 'including by launching the £150 million community ownership fund promised in the manifesto'. If West Yorkshire is to use this moment wisely to ensure the sustainability of all its rugby league clubs, it should be aiming for the powers and resources signalled by this previous promise by the government to be included in further powers devolved to regional democracy here.

In fact, culture (alongside transport and skills) is one of the main areas where the West Yorkshire mayor to be elected in 2021 will have some room for innovation and, as described earlier, rugby league surely has a strong case for investment and support on cultural grounds alone. As suggested by Le Treiziste blog, this may be rugby league's opportune moment to build fan ownership (24), including building on the experiences of Hunslet as a supporter run club since 2012 developing into a 'hybrid ownership model relying heavily on the supporters trust, but (with private investors) standing in to underwrite issues such as the current budget deficit of £30,000' and of Bramley, reborn as an industrial and provident society and RL's first fan owned club in 2004. (25) In fact Hunslet director Damian Irvine has argued that, "There isn't one person in rugby league who could argue a well-supported and iconic club such as Bradford Bulls wouldn't have been miles better off with supporter ownership currently or over the past 7 years considering their current predicament." (26)

Ultimately the government's loan may simply add to the evidence for how Coronavirus has shifted the Overton Window. Regular Transatlantic club competition has been a rare competitive advantage for rugby league in globalised sport and in order for the game to survive at the elite level, making regular Transatlantic team sport a reality must not simply be given up. But in the context of how the Coronavirus pandemic has affected West Yorkshire, it is the game's deep roots that have put it closer to the political centre.

## **Corporate Social Responsibility**

In Tony Collins' outstanding Rugby Reloaded podcast, the ex-St Helens CEO Sean McGuire identified that if the game was to become less dependent on matchday income and TV revenues, it would need to increase its sponsorship (27). But how does rugby league do that whilst staying true to its founding values? Fundamentally it is about transparency and accountability: Understanding where that sponsorship comes from now and being accountable for where it might come from in future.

On that basis, the 2020 upsurge in interest in the distinctive values of rugby league caused by the signings of Israel Folau (by Catalans Dragons) and Sonny Bill Williams (by Toronto Wolfpack) has to be welcomed. For many people, one of rugby league's most important and distinctive values is inclusion. The game was specifically created to ensure a group of people who couldn't afford to take time off from work were not excluded from playing rugby. And therefore just as David Stern did with the NBA, rugby league must do everything it can to protect that brand image. Clearly words used on social media by a player like Folau, shunned by other leagues and sports, which may create an atmosphere of hate for possible players and fans are not only bad for those directly affected, but also for rugby league's self-image and for the brand it wishes to project externally. But are these really distinct RL values or are there societal values that change over time and RL acts upon them quicker than other sports?

What about a sponsor's logo? Clearly Sonny Bill Williams's request to take the logo of Super League title sponsor Betfred off his playing shirt was also about values. Like Folau, these were rooted in an interpretation of a holy text but unlike Folau, they cast no specific aspersion on any individuals. It seems clear that Williams didn't want to appear to endorse gambling and perhaps through that to encourage people to actually do it. In that sense, it was a reminder of how Silk Cut, John Player and other tobacco firms were prevented from continuing to sponsor rugby league and other sporting events. It also reminded me of protests against Sky in 1995 (primarily motivated by possible forced mergers of historic clubs rather than at how Rupert Murdoch used his media influence more generally) and also players and fans covering up the British Coal logo on the 1992 Great Britain shirt in protest at pit closures. But those protests also had at least an element of another interpretation of corporate social responsibility, that is the extent to which players, clubs and the wider game are benefiting through wages etc paid for by profits made by an organisation carrying out an activity that goes against the values of rugby league. Or perhaps, in terms of protecting RL's image from negative judgement by those outside the game, against the prevailing values in wider society.

Steve Mascord has often written about the impact on sport, particularly contact sport, of changing values in society. There is no doubt that this is a factor in the way that many people in rugby league reacted with horror at Folau's signing. Perhaps, as John Davidson has suggested, the next value change for which rugby league needs to prepare itself, is in the extent to which rugby league itself contributes to climate change. And the extent to which it appears to benefit from, or endorse, those having a negative impact on the environment.

On the one hand, rugby league's traditional emphasis on clubs not countries gives it a distinctive appeal that makes people feel included who question the idea of nation states/borders in general or who question their sense of belonging to a particular 'country'. In that context establishing Transatlantic club rugby league has been an exciting development that also gives it a rare competitive advantage over other codes of football or invasion games. But what about those airline emissions? And given the lack of transparency in rugby league's finances, what do we know about the sources of the wealth that have made Transatlantic rugby league possible?

We do know that Toronto Wolfpack's majority owner David Argyle was at Forbes and Manhattan (28), a hedge fund who helped Brazil Potash to get going, and is now executive co-chairman of the group leading on potash mines in the Amazon (29). This is a development that has been welcomed by Brazil's President Bolsonaro and which many people support as providing jobs for and generating income for areas with few other options. We also know that this potash mining is aiming to reduce Brazil's dependency on importing potash to use as fertiliser for Brazil's massive soy bean harvest. A lot of soy bean production in Brazil has relied on rainforest clearance. This has also faced resistance in particular from indigenous communities who feel they haven't been consulted and will not benefit from their traditional lands being used in this way (30).

I don't really know if Forbes and Manhattan or Brazil Potash have done anything in the Amazon with which rugby league fans in West Yorkshire or wider society might disagree. But maybe that's the point. The impact of betting is visible right here whereas the actions of hedge funds and mining in the Amazon are far away, less scrutinised and primarily affect people who have had no contact with West Yorkshire. That shouldn't mean we care less. If what happens off the pitch is really what makes rugby league distinct, the game owes it to its founding values to keep asking questions.

But is it easier for people in rugby league to ask some questions than others? Greater transparency in terms of corporate social responsibility means questions for clubs in West Yorkshire just as much as those in areas of expansion. Do we know where the money comes from? How it's spent? How it compares with other sports here?

For example, it is definitely the case that the current two biggest clubs in each of the two biggest codes of football in West Yorkshire (Leeds United AFC and Leeds Rhinos RLFC) have very different approaches to funding, from relative season ticket prices to United's controversial trip to Myanmar in 2018 (31). But Rhinos' own corporate social responsibility as a private business has been questioned in seeking council funding for ground redevelopment and in its abandoned attempt to partially pay for that redevelopment by selling off green land for housing against the wishes of some local residents in Tingley and Weetwood in 2016 (32).

There have also been serious questions posed by refugee groups in Yorkshire (such as SYMAAG) about Rhinos' relationship with Mears Group. Mears have provided very welcome support for the life changing work of Leeds Rhinos Foundation in local communities, including hosting refugee visits to Headingley through LASSN and making deliveries of food etc for the vulnerable throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as promoting the role of

women in rugby league through shirt sponsorship of the Women's Super League team. Ultimately it is only through Mears' commercial success as a business that they have been able to support the Foundation financially, including through profits made from Home Office contracts to accommodate asylum seekers. But their treatment of asylum seekers in their care during the Covid 19 pandemic, particularly at their Urban House accommodation centre in Wakefield, was heavily criticised (33).

Leeds Rhinos themselves by contrast made Headingley Stadium available for emergency needs during the Covid pandemic (34) and its Foundation won the Rugby League Foundation of the year award in 2018. It is perhaps surprising though, given how much value government has placed on such activities, that the only real investigation into the relationship between clubs and their community foundations to which the government could refer was 2019's Rugby League Dividend report and this wasn't able to cover West Yorkshire in any detail. This nevertheless excellent report identified four key themes regarding the social capital of rugby league clubs - Social cohesiveness, Identity, Aspiration and Role models (35). The only reference to RL activity in West Yorkshire however was an interview that took place at Wibsey Warriors ARLFC and which provided one quotation for the document.

For example, it is unclear across those professional clubs in West Yorkshire that make a profit, what proportion is channelled into its community arm compared to other budget headings (e.g. staff salaries) and what proportion is 'In kind' donations. Given this, how much can only actually be delivered because of access to charitable funding? To what extent are Community Foundation activities also about promoting a private business? How has this changed over time, given austerity; changing access to charitable funds; and the end of initiatives offered free in the past? Given some clubs are more profitable than others, is this reflected in their contributions to their trusts (or other charities)?

The Rugby League Dividend report struggled with 'the lack of evidence for almost all income and endowments (except grants)' but for the two professional clubs it did consider, Warrington Wolves were in receipt of grants from 'national charities' plus Warrington Borough Council whilst Hull FC provided more detail with grants from the National Lottery, Comic Relief, Awards for All, Hull CCG, British Legion, Sky, Sport England and fundraising from local business, Arco. These detailed investigations into the finances of the Wolves and Hull FC Foundations in 2017 didn't however identify specifically what in kind funding came from the clubs themselves.

Will corporate donors give money to activities that they wouldn't ordinarily fund because they are fronted by their local club? Are community trusts bidding against other charities to fund certain things and are they genuinely best placed to have best impact for 'service users'? Interestingly the Rugby League Dividend did find that "the status that the club has puts them in a prominent, and in these communities unique, position to be able to reach into the community" (36)

From experience, my instinct would be to say that these rugby league club foundations/trusts are a real asset to each town (37). But that should not simply be taken for granted. Given the founding values of rugby league, what should the corporate social



responsibility goals be for clubs in West Yorkshire? And how can they be held accountable for these in future?

## **Consolidation and Expansion**

Rugby league is defining for many people and places in West Yorkshire. In fact, the Rugby League Dividend report found that RL "provides a sense of belonging and identity even to those individuals who do not identify as Rugby League fans." (38) Sometimes this means people here feel such a strong sense of ownership of and pride in the game that they are accused of being 'regressive', specifically in the sense of not wanting the game to expand. Even the Wakefield born, former Bradford player and Leeds coach, Brian McDermott's comments after he coached Toronto to promotion in 2019 suggested he saw the heartlands and expansion areas in opposition (39). His focus in that famous interview was 'growth'. In reality however, there is a priority even more vital: Survival. And in my view Toronto and their opponents that day, Featherstone, are both important for RL's survival.

If rugby league is to honour those places that sustained it and updated its founding values with every new decade, it is important to acknowledge the balance of two risky options and where it would matter most. For example, although there is a proposed New York City club, there is no professional rugby league there now. Nothing is yet lost and if the RL dream there were to die, very few people would ever notice whereas West Yorkshire towns like Featherstone and Keighley have a long and proud history of rugby league that defines the town. If RL dies, it will matter a lot. Why risk a place where it matters now for a place where it may never matter?

How does rugby league balance its debt to the places and people who have sustained RL for so long with the desire to share their greatest creation with the world? For many people, pride in West Yorkshire, in Yorkshire and in the North is most positively expressed by sharing its best bits, such as encouraging new RL fans around the world. But this region is our home, it is where our children will grow up, and if its future is in the balance, rugby league fans here have no choice, they have to take seriously the impact of any decision on the region and in doing so, accept that those making the case for prioritising rugby league's survival in the economically challenged places that challenged power and created the game in the first place may be making an argument consistent with rugby league's own founding values.

It is also worth considering the history of the game in places like Brisbane and Auckland, where an ecosystem of many semi-professional clubs that had been the highest level of the club game there was 'crowned' with a single, fully professional NRL club. Brisbane Broncos are now the best supported rugby league club in the world playing in their 52,500 capacity Suncorp Stadium but there remains a successful ecosystem of semi-professional men's and women's clubs playing in a Queensland Cup considered so attractive in its own right that it now includes Papua New Guinea's only professional club, PNG Hunters. In fact Leeds Rhinos' Charlotte Booth left Leeds Rhinos in the amateur top tier of Women's Super League in order to become the first England international to be paid for club rugby league after signing for West Brisbane Panthers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> tier Queensland competition. Her former Leeds teammate Courtney Hill had also returned briefly to her native Australia to then play in the Auckland 9's with the fully professional NRLW team, Sydney Roosters.

According to interviews with players, fans and coaches during the documentary, 100 years of Auckland rugby league, the founding of the NRL club Auckland Warriors (now NZ Warriors) did have a big impact on the culture of RL there. There was a significant drop in the profile of

and interest in longstanding clubs who had previously played in well attended carnivals of rugby league every weekend at Carlaw Park, including the sale of that ground to help pay for the Warriors' new home, Mount Smart Stadium. Generally the interviewees welcomed the Warriors' impact on the profile of rugby league overall in New Zealand but warned that clubs in similar situations have to be prepared for the consequences (40).

If 'growth' means expensive tickets, corporate finance from controversial sources, establishment nationalism and a general suppression of/embarrassment at working class supporter culture, rugby league has already died but if growth means the survival of a game that promotes the identity of those feeling under-represented and undervalued, rugby league growth has meaning: Catalans in France, Polynesians in NZ, Black Welshmen, working class Northerners. Rugby League needs to survive to continue the promise of its founding values: rugby for all (including small postindustrial towns in West Yorkshire). To survive, rugby league needs to attract TV money and corporate sponsorship to its highest tier and to do that it needs to build on competitive advantage: Transatlantic club competition, including Toronto, Ottawa, New York City, Valencia, Belgrade etc. Although rugby union's current higher costs are an additional barrier, they could theoretically try Transatlantic clubs. But it is rugby league that has a rare competitive advantage here and so must make it work. It gives the game distinction off the pitch, something that makes survival possible.

That expansion however is absolutely dependent on the complex ecosystem of rugby league in West Yorkshire and other rugby league heartlands. I grew up loving the rugby league my Loiner nana had shown me on TV but as a butcher's son in a state comprehensive in industrial Derbyshire, I had little chance of even seeing an oval ball otherwise. Meanwhile kids just like me (but with talent) in Featherstone and Batley could actually get paid to play because kids like me would pay to see them play. Some even toured France, Papua New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand etc. To me this was the soul of rugby league, this is why it existed. To me the best of expansion is about giving those same chances to working class kids in Greenwich, Peterlee, Coventry, Easterhouse, Wrexham, Toronto, Brussels etc. The chance to grow up in rugby league culture and use it as an advantage to see the world.

Currently however, there are not many places in the world where rugby has a deep culture in working class communities. In this context, growing up in Dewsbury, Siddal, Normanton etc is a privilege. Expansion of rugby league means a better shot than similar kids elsewhere at earning a decent wage in Toronto, New York City, Ottawa, Sydney, Perpignan etc. Growing up in a deep RL culture is unusual and an asset which means the growth of the game is partially about giving more opportunities to those of us lucky enough to live here. Even now, the class prejudice experienced by rare working class players in rugby union like Ellis Genge reveal just how much rugby league and its founding values are needed. (41)

This is also highlighted when considering changes in other sports popular in West Yorkshire. For example, Anthony Clavane discovered that 75% of players used in the 2005 England Ashes cricket team went to state schools however their 2015 equivalent revealed a trajectory in the opposite direction, 73% of players came from private schools. (42)

Perhaps rugby league should learn from the sport which became its winter cousin after RL's move to Summer. A physical and fast team invasion sport with deep roots in industrial

communities north of where most power and money is found and with a culture of community pride and fierce rivalries. RL could learn a lot from how (ice) hockey has retained its deep association with Canada whilst also giving working class kids from small towns in that heartland the opportunity to earn a living as far south as Tampa. For example, when I first started watching the NHL in 2004, a twelve year old club in Florida (Tampa Bay Lightning) won the Stanley Cup led by two men who'd grown up playing on the frozen ponds of Québec, Martin St Louis and Vincent Lecavalier. The equivalent of a Featherstone Lions U13s player in 2020 scoring the match winning try for Toronto Wolfpack in the Super League Grand Final of 2030.

It will be interesting to see whether rugby league's future becomes an issue during the 2021 West Yorkshire mayoral election. I would argue that it should. In fact, I would argue that the mayor should not just actively engage in fan ownership of clubs within the region itself but also that the mayor should actively engage with RL expansion as a means of promoting West Yorkshire's people, culture and business in overseas markets. In fact, in the foreword to the Rugby League Dividend report, Greater Manchester Mayor (and 2019 RFL President) Andy Burnham specifically highlighted the role of RL in promoting social mobility.

## **Inclusion**

Despite the fact that it is played in a different geographical and social context, people in West Yorkshire can be proud at how the founding values of rugby league have been interpreted in Australia as described earlier. But what do the ideas of a 'national code that represents its citizens as equally as possible' and representing 'your people, not the arbitrarily defined country into which you were born' mean for West Yorkshire today?

Following Jamaica's successful qualification for the 2021 Rugby League World Cup, the team played a friendly against an England XIII at Headingley. Working alongside the Jamaica team was Leeds born, former Hunslet Parkside player Jason Robinson who had represented Great Britain in rugby league and then England in rugby union. Commenting on the atmosphere created by large numbers of Jamaica fans in the South Stand, he observed, "You go to a Leeds Rhinos game and you'll see very few black people in the stands. How far are we away from Harehills and Chapeltown? A couple of miles, if that." (43)

Given our society, it is undoubtedly the responsibility of all of us in positions of relative privilege to actively go out and break down barriers, not just sit back and expect people to come to us. On that basis, the fact that Robinson was back engaged with rugby league and that his comments sparked debate was very welcome. Looking at 2011 census data for Leeds, approximately 6.2% of Leeds' population could have Black African and/or Caribbean heritage (adding together figures for those identifying as Black African, Black Caribbean and Black Other with those identifying as Mixed Race with African and/or Caribbean heritage). Given that Leeds Rhinos had an average of 13,706 fans at the four home games played with crowds at Headingley during the 2020 Super League season, the club should be aiming to get at least 850 fans with those backgrounds at each game. In fact, it may be that demographic changes since 2011 and a re-analysis of that data to consider the average age, income, gender and other profiles of RL crowds and the city's Afro-Caribbean communities mean that even an increase to 850 would not be enough of a change.

Nevertheless, using the same data, Leeds should aim to get least 1554 fans with Asian backgrounds at each Leeds match. There is a lot to do. Similarly Tony Hannan's excellent book about Batley in 2016, 'Underdogs', describes bridging what appears to be a gap between the 44% of the local population of South Asian heritage and the local Bulldogs RL club (who won the world's oldest rugby club competition the Challenge Cup in 1897, its first year).

This is all within the context of rugby league's leading role amongst all sports in breaking down barriers to ideas of what constitutes British, Australian or New Zealander. For example, as highlighted by Tony Collins, the first Maori to captain any NZ national sports team (Steve Matene), the first indigenous Australian to captain any Australian national sports team (Arthur Beetson) and the first black Briton to captain any British national sports team (Clive Sullivan) were all rugby league players. Jason Robinson himself became a rightly celebrated World Cup winning hero with the England rugby union team but the fact he grew up in a rugby league heartland was a rare advantage compared to the many other black, working class, Northern kids who have never been noticed or nurtured by rugby union.

Nevertheless there should be no question about the need to increase black and minority ethnic presence at all levels of RL and that the game's proud history must not be allowed to breed complacency, particularly in the context of the amount of far right activity that continues to take place in West Yorkshire more generally (44) and the experiences of players like Huddersfield's Jordan Turner who told the Yorkshire Post's Dave Craven that "The police have stopped me numerous times whilst driving my car for no apparent reason, the last incident only being in 2018 when I was followed – ironically right outside (Huddersfield's) John Smith's Stadium – by a police car. There also was a time when my mum wouldn't come to watch me play as she couldn't handle the racist remarks directed at me from the stand." (45)

Over the years, Robinson himself has experienced racism in different forms and a common racist assertion of the past has been to reject civic nationalist ideas of identity and to claim that people with Robinson's background are 'really' Jamaican and not British. The fact that he allied himself so closely with the Jamaican rugby league team despite having played for England and Great Britain teams was considered as evidence by racist elements amongst rugby support who had no time or empathy for more progressive ideas of dual and layered identities. To me, he should have the right to choose whatever he wants to be. But it is interesting to note that in terms of rugby league's oft stated desire to further develop international representative competition, Robinson choosing Jamaica would have been like the game changing moment when widely admired North Queensland forward Jason Taumalolo chose to represent Tonga. In the context of rugby league's founding values, there is therefore a complex relationship between the genuine goal of inclusion inherent within civic nationalism (46) and the game's perceived need for more competitive teams at international level.

Writing in the Sydney Morning Herald, Andrew Webster described the changing demographics of Parramatta in the rugby league heartland of Western Sydney and what it meant for the fanbase of local NRL club, the Eels. It was particularly interesting to read in the piece that Parra fans born in Kenya, Indian, China, Lebanon etc primarily identified as Australian (47). In broader socio-political terms, for many this is the ideal anti-racist model for building civic nationalist identity within a political realm - an inclusive idea based on residency not ethnicity. Former Parramatta winger, Semi Radradra was an interesting test of 'civic-nationalism' when the Fijian born star was chosen to play for the world's strongest international team, Australia. Rugby League's founding values would suggest that nobody other than he had the right to decide if he felt Fijian or Australian or both. Whilst at the same time, the experience of Taumalolo and other Tongan internationals suggest that players choosing countries outside the big three (of England, Australia and New Zealand) is better for international RL. Given this, it could mean different things for RL compared to society more broadly if the growth of Jamaican rugby league means the many players of linked heritage in West Yorkshire start to turn down England/GB. Nevertheless the Parra model suggests that clubs generally need to engage with players from migrant backgrounds as well as Huddersfield have historically done with its Caribbean communities and as long as they have a good choice of who to play for, both RL and wider society will win.

The game's history of inclusion for players from a wide diversity of backgrounds is much stronger than the representation of that diversity on the terraces. Nevertheless, across the

world of sport, that history is not widely understood. A history that suggests people from working class backgrounds in West Yorkshire and across the North can do things for themselves and when they do, it is invariably more socially just than what went before. A typical example was in 2019 when Toronto owner David Argyle asked Swinton's Congo born forward Jose Kenga if "they allow black people in Swinton" (48). Notwithstanding the personal impact on Kenga himself, it also showed a complete lack of understanding of RL's history. Just 5 years previously, the popularly elected mayor of Greater Toronto was Rob Ford, whose political career had been dogged by accusations of racism. By contrast Swinton was one of many rugby league towns in the industrial North that had a long history of welcoming black Welshmen and celebrating them as heroes after they had been ignored in their birth towns.

For many people outside rugby league heartlands like West Yorkshire, they would have had little chance of ever knowing about a man like legendary former Leeds and Bradford coach Roy Francis without Carolyn Hitt's BBC Wales documentary *The Rugby Codebreakers - An epic story of race, class, privilege, hypocrisy, rebellion and the sheer ecstasy of scoring a try that challenged the London Hegemony's narrative of racist, working class Northerners* (49). Interestingly though Hitt's final line described how it was "the English who embraced (the working class Welshmen of all races) and hold them in their hearts to this very day". A description that doesn't seem to adequately do justice to the distinctiveness and identity of people in rugby league towns in West Yorkshire and the industrial North.

## **Identity**

For a long time, a lot of people in West Yorkshire have considered Yorkshire County Cricket Club to be the closest they get to a national team, a team representing their primary sense of identity. But given that England and Great Britain rugby league teams throughout most of their history have mostly been made up of working class Northerners playing the game they gave to the world, for many others this is the closest that they have felt to an international sporting identity. For people in West Yorkshire, its only international rugby league representative team has always been called 'Great Britain' or 'England', but their love of rugby league is such that if they were called Elmet, Yorkshire, Northumbria, Europe or whatever, they'd still want to see them in action.

That is not to say that there are not many people in West Yorkshire who identify with the idea of England, especially in sporting contexts, nor that the founding values of rugby league would want them to do anything other than associate with whatever they decide as an individual. But for many in West Yorkshire and wider Yorkshire and the North, especially RL fans, the idea that being part of 'England' is unquestionably true or in our best interests is debatable at best. Given this, it is fascinating to consider reactions to the news that there was a to be a Great Britain rugby league tour of New Zealand and Papua New Guinea in 2019. Whilst much of this concentrated on the fact that very few of the tourists were qualified to play for Scotland, Wales or Ireland, a big aspect of the reaction was missed in the media coverage. The great appeal of GB RL for many in West Yorkshire was that you had an international sporting team that didn't force you to pretend you were 'English'.

Whilst many in Scotland consider the idea of 'Great Britain' something from which to escape, in sporting terms, Scotland has long often had the chance to represent itself internationally but those with Yorkshire (or Elmet or Northern) identities never got to represent themselves in international sport. Just like the EU, GB is inherently about multiple identities and so GB RL provided space for the many here who didn't like to be told "you are English".

As identified by Pete Woodcock's research (50), Yorkshire identity is definitely the least contested idea here. This is particularly important given that the UK census always has limited options and yet is often used to justify the idea of 'English' identity as natural and unquestionable. If people in Yorkshire are given the chance to say how they really feel, most identify as primarily Yorkshire with Englishness sometimes a 2nd layer. It is also important to note that this strong sense of Yorkshire identity is one based on residency and welcomes newcomers providing an open and inclusive sense of belonging.

Undoubtedly the very existence of a team representing 'Elmet', 'Yorkshire', 'Northumbria/The North', 'England', 'Scotland', 'GB', 'Europe' etc is in itself a political expression, nevertheless there are many people in West Yorkshire for whom it is possible to see England as an appropriate scale for sport whilst not necessarily seeing the same geography as an appropriate scale for governance. For others however in West Yorkshire, this scale and this identity do not represent them and in 2017, the Yorkshire international representative football team was founded by YIFA to play in competitions organized by CONIFA, a federation for international football teams from nations, de-facto nations, regions, minority peoples and sports isolated territories. (51).



For many people in rugby league, the income and interest that is generated by the England rugby union team is a goal to which RL should strive and therefore all energy should be put into making England Rugby League a success. There is no doubt that the contexts of football (a game with little need to further expand within Britain) and rugby league (a game that sometimes sees its geographical concentration as too limiting) are different and so they have differing needs in terms of developing 'international' representative sport. Nevertheless, it would seem entirely consistent with the founding values of rugby league that a Yorkshire international rugby league team should be able to co-exist alongside an England team.

In the rugby league context, there was long a difficult choice for players who felt different identities. A player might find themselves picked for a lowly ranked international sporting team early in their career. That player might think that they had the potential later in their career to be picked for one of the only 3 teams to have ever won a Rugby League World Cup and knew that accepting the first offer would make them ineligible for any other team. At the same time, they might associate more with the lower ranked identity and risk not being chosen by any team in future if they turned down that first offer. This might have affected possible Yorkshire players, especially in the early years as the team established itself.

In a sign of how rugby league's founding values are interpreted today however, agreeing to play for Yorkshire would not now lead to players suffering lost opportunities if they do. As an example, Cronulla prop Andrew Fifita was born in Australia to a family of Tongan and indigenous Australian descent. He has played for the Indigenous Australian team against New Zealand Maori and for both Tonga and Australia in international rugby league competition. This is possible because international rugby league rules mean a player can choose to play for both a tier 1 team (such as Australia or England) and also for a tier 2 team (such as Tonga at the time, and presumably Yorkshire would be at least initially).

Given this, I would argue that rugby league has actually moved beyond civic nationalism and towards post-nationalism in its international eligibility, "Post-national thought is... about the use of a different lens to examine the challenges and precepts of an entire politics, economy and society... Space for multiple identities and multiple loyalties, for an idea of belonging which is comfortable with contradictions" (52). If any sport should be open to people self-determining their own identity, given its history, it should be RL. Even if many people here in West Yorkshire would support an England RL team over a Yorkshire team because it would have a better chance of beating Australia etc if players stood alongside Lancastrians and Cumbrians (a Northern team perhaps), the founding values of RL suggest it should not just be allowed but encouraged and that it shouldn't be contradictory to the existence of an England team for those who identify that way. Given what has happened with e.g. Fifita playing for 3 different RL 'nations', RL is already further down the route of post-nationalism than any other sport. It's not just about blood and soil ideas of nationality compared to residency, it's about layers of identity being equally valid. The RLIF already encourages this by encouraging players to nominate tier 1 and tier 2 identities.

Despite this, the experience of YIFA suggests that there would be challenges in terms of whether such a team would be allowed to play in RLIF competitions (YIFA are not allowed in FIFA competitions) and even if they were, whether they would be encouraged or find

obstacles placed in their way by those with more power. As well as not being allowed in football competitions considered by most people to be 'official' (ie. FA/UEFA/FIFA sanctioned), YIFA have also found it hard to use many grounds in the region as to be able to play regular club competition in England-wide and regional leagues, they are under FA jurisdiction.

Nevertheless, rugby league has a long history of people who do not primarily identify with a recognised state/international sporting representative team creating XIII's to take on more widely recognised bodies, from the Catalans de France teams in the late 1940's who faced touring Australia and New Zealand teams, to the longstanding New Zealand Maori team that competed in the 2000 Rugby League World Cup and the Cumbria team that played against England in 2010. Given rugby league's desire for more competitive international representative sides and the founding values of the game, any Yorkshire (or Elmet or Northern) international rugby league team should be welcomed and given an opportunity just as much as any other identity in the world of rugby league.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

By necessity, this paper cannot reflect in any detail the broad diversity of the rugby league ecosystem in West Yorkshire nor be specific about every aspect of the game and its future. What I hope it has done however has been to start to develop an updated interpretation of what the founding values of rugby league might mean for the future of the game and in particular for the place where it was created to be shared with the world, West Yorkshire.

In summary, these are the key points and recommendations. They form a series of principles for the future as rugby league tries to build back better. In doing so, it should always be noted that rugby league was created in dissent and therefore in updating its founding values, it should be acknowledged that these are just my recommendations and constructive criticism and alternative proposals are not just welcomed, they are expected.

### **1. Rugby League in West Yorkshire must aim to provide life chances for people here and around the world**

Rugby League was created in West Yorkshire to be specifically different from the rugby game that was led by the London based establishment. One of those tenets was that rugby should be entertaining to watch, however it is off the pitch and not on it where rugby league has most space in future to retain its assertive distinctiveness. That means both honouring the places in West Yorkshire that sustained the game and also developing the game globally in order to enhance the life chances of people growing up in the region's deep RL culture which should be celebrated as an unusual asset. The West Yorkshire mayor should play an active role in this.

### **2. Rugby League in West Yorkshire must not just settle for inclusion, it should do something more than that – it should be actively anti-discriminatory**

Rugby League took steps towards people in West Yorkshire and elsewhere who might be excluded and did what was necessary to ensure they could be included. It should always strive to be the sport that does most to represent its citizens as equally as possible, such as in ensuring that people are properly paid for their labour and in ensuring that people's class, race, religion, sexuality or other identity cannot hold them back. This means for example, making it a priority that female players and young male players in West Yorkshire can earn a decent living from the game, even if on a semi-professional basis. It will also be important to learn from other sports and actively take steps towards those underrepresented on the terraces, as well as in all parts of the game, such as people from South Asian communities in West Yorkshire.

### **3. Rugby League in West Yorkshire must always be open to people representing their own sense of belonging, identity and pride**

Rugby League was created by people far away from the dominant capital of the country which governed that place at that time. It should always provide opportunities for people to represent whichever identity they define for themselves, not the arbitrarily defined borders into which a person was born. This means ensuring that here in West Yorkshire, players, coaches, administrators and supporters should have the opportunity to choose and represent their own identity on the international stage, which could include a Yorkshire XIII and others that don't yet have an internationally recognised team.

#### **4. Rugby League in West Yorkshire must always strive to be professional, competitive, sustainable and accountable**

Given that, in West Yorkshire and other regions of the post-industrial North, rugby league provides a sense of belonging and a source of pride, it therefore needs to be as professional and as competitive as possible at its highest level. This means being able to pay players well enough for the region's clubs to keep and attract the best. These players sit at the top of a complex ecosystem but, notwithstanding the importance of starting to pay players in Women's Super League, it is the sustainability of the men's professional game that has the biggest impact on that ecosystem's overall health. In defining the future for West Yorkshire's professional and semi-professional clubs, there needs to be due consideration given to the impact of agglomeration in the region's cities and also to models of sustainability from other sports and other urban areas where there are many clubs within a relatively small geographical space. At the Super League level, there needs to be a focus on finance not just in terms of attracting new and better sources of sponsorship (to reduce dependency on matchday income and TV revenues) but also in terms of taking transparency and corporate social responsibility more seriously. This should include further, more detailed investigations into club finances and future audits with a strong ethical dimension. At the Championship level and below, private investment will also remain important (as demonstrated by Hunslet) but clubs and wider civil society should also take the opportunity provided by government interest in community ownership of sports clubs to build fan owned co-operatives (such as on the industrial and provident society model at Bramley) supported by regional democracy as an integral part of its development. These developments should consider the advantage for such clubs of actively placing themselves as alternatives to the wealthier clubs within a city or wider region on the Newtown model.

#### **5. Rugby League in West Yorkshire must serve as inspiration for self-determination through regional democracy and vice versa**

Rugby League only exists because people decided to do more than just have a whinge and instead sorted things out for themselves. This is the fundamental nature of Regional Democracy and is the basis on which rugby league in West Yorkshire should judge itself - a proud assertion of founding values instead of allowing ourselves to be judged by others on their terms. Nevertheless just as Same Skies Think Tank believes people in West Yorkshire should view the government's devolution deals and elected mayors as an opportunity to build the next steps in regional democracy on our own terms, West Yorkshire should use the spotlight provided by the current government's interest in rugby league towns as an opportunity to build rugby league's future to our vision. That should include lobbying government to devolve authority and resources to support community ownership of rugby league clubs to the West Yorkshire mayor. We should particularly have special pride in our creation and go out of our way to share it with the world and encourage others to thrive within it.

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30. Report on indigenous opposition <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2019/11/07/brazils-indigenous-are-fighting-environmental-exploitation-church-needs>
31. BBC Report on Leeds United in Myanmar <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/44052938>
32. BBC Report on Leeds Rhinos' attempts to sell land for housing <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-36754781>
33. May Bulman report in the Independent on Urban House in Wakefield <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-asylum-seekers-urban-house-a9430991.html>
34. Leeds Rhinos statement on access to Headingley stadium during Covid crisis <https://www.therhinos.co.uk/2020/04/01/emerald-headingley-stadium-and-ticket-office-now-closed/>
35. Rugby League Dividend report, page 30 (see reference 9)
36. Rugby League Dividend report, page 32 (see reference 9)
37. Discussion between Phil Caplan and Richard Shaw-Wright about rugby league clubs' community trusts (from 1 hour 19 minutes on 5/11 edition of Forty 20 podcast) <https://forty20rl.podbean.com/>
38. Rugby League Dividend report, page 33 (see reference 9)
39. Rod Studd tweet including recording of interview with Brian McDermott [https://twitter.com/Rod\\_Studd/status/1180587246249902080?s=20](https://twitter.com/Rod_Studd/status/1180587246249902080?s=20)

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41. Link to tweet referencing Ellis Genge's interview in the Daily Mail <https://twitter.com/ianeastleeds/status/1074404978901598209?s=20>
42. Link to tweet referencing Anthony Clavane's book, 'A Yorkshire Tragedy' <https://twitter.com/ianeastleeds/status/1056879499441291264?s=20>
43. Link to John Davidson including Jason Robinson quotation <https://twitter.com/johnnyddavidson/status/1186025918520676352?s=20>
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51. Ben Machell in Esquire magazine on YIFA <https://www.esquire.com/uk/culture/a20135576/match-of-the-dales-yorkshires-international-football-devolution/>
52. Guardian opinion piece on the idea of Post-nationalism <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/04/the-canada-experiment-is-this-the-worlds-first-postnational-country>

This is a **Same Skies** publication.

Same Skies is the regional democracy think tank for West Yorkshire.

We encourage and facilitate the active participation of all residents in West Yorkshire's regional democracy, no matter where they or their families were born.

We understand that engaging those who are most marginalised by national power means taking active steps towards those people, not just expecting them to come to us or to trust us.

Our regional democracy must learn from, and make the most of, the skills, knowledge and experiences of the people who live and work here.

We challenge anyone who seeks power in West Yorkshire to do so and we will hold them to account if they don't.

At the same time, we challenge the legitimacy of national power in every way that it affects us. That includes the media, big business (especially finance), culture, charities, political parties and other national organisations as much as it does the Westminster government and Whitehall civil service.

We propose radical subsidiarity: that every decision about our lives that can be made in West Yorkshire is made in West Yorkshire, and as far as possible in neighbourhood and local democracy. No decisions that are best made outside West Yorkshire should be made without our prior consent and appropriate participation.

We are a think tank that is about, and in the service of, a place and the people who live and work here. We care about the whole region, its towns, villages, suburbs and natural environment as well as its city centres.

We are interested in everything that happens here, and the interconnections between different aspects of our society, economy, cultures, politics and environment.

We work to create new ideas and ways of doing things by bringing people with different kinds of knowledge together for our common good.

Same Skies started as a network of citizens in 2015, and our organisational structure is still that as much as anything else.

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The front cover photographs were taken by Ian at various rugby league matches in West Yorkshire.

*June 2020*