



PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK GUIDE

WOMEN AND GIRLS





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INTRODUCTION



To grow and retain Women and Girls in rugby, we must offer experiences that reflect their unique motivations, needs, and stages of development.

The Women and Girls Participation Framework, supported by the Reflection Tool, provides a shared approach for unions to assess their current offerings, plan for future needs, and focus investment where it will have the greatest impact. Unlike a traditional linear pathway, the framework is flexible and locally adaptable, recognising that participants engage with rugby in many ways.

The framework describes offerings that contribute a thriving rugby environment where all participants can access meaningful, development-focused experiences. This strengthens the community game, builds a strong foundation for high performance, and ensures both current and future players have the opportunity to participate in the game.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The NZ Rugby (NZR) Strategy encompasses three key pillars:

- Maintain and Grow a Thriving Community Game
- Teams in Black Winning with Mana
- A Successful Growing and Profitable Business, all contributing to the overarching vision to Inspire and Unify Through Rugby.

Women's and girls' rugby is central to a sustainable future for the game. The Women and Girls (W&G) System Strategy provides a 10-year roadmap to achieving the outcomes of the NZR Strategy through intentional leadership, targeted investment, and system-wide alignment that responds to the unique challenges and opportunities of the women's game.

A key recommendation highlighted in the Women and Girls Strategy is the creation of a 'National W&G pathway' that is participant-centred, flexible, and adaptable to regional needs, player numbers, and local contexts. This recommendation emerged from extensive nationwide consultation with participants, unions, and stakeholders who highlighted key challenges:

- **Lack of clarity:**

Confusion around structures, versions, competitions, and calendars; offerings are inconsistent and vary across regions.

- **Entry differences:**

Women and girls often start later, requiring support at key transition points to ensure safety, confidence, and long-term participation.

- **Critical mass challenges:**

Smaller player numbers create mixed-age teams and competitions, posing safety and development considerations. Participants report some fear but also a strong desire for skill development.

- **Need for flexible options:**

Girls-only, non-contact, and adaptable formats are critical to increasing engagement and retaining players.

In response, the strategy recommends expanding flexible girls-only and contact rugby formats, delivering skill-building and injury prevention programmes, and aligning festivals, competitions, and partnerships to provide consistent, high-quality experiences. Adding more programmes without system-wide coordination risks duplication, confusion, and competition between activities. To achieve lasting impact, we must simplify, clarify roles and responsibilities, and ensure offerings are clear, sustainable, and effective. Rather than a national pathway, we are taking a broader approach through a National Framework that delivers on the recommendation while providing greater flexibility, clarity, and adaptability to local needs.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

TOTAL NO PARTICIPANTS (2024)¹

WOMEN AND GIRLS

33,757 22%
OF TOTAL PLAYERS

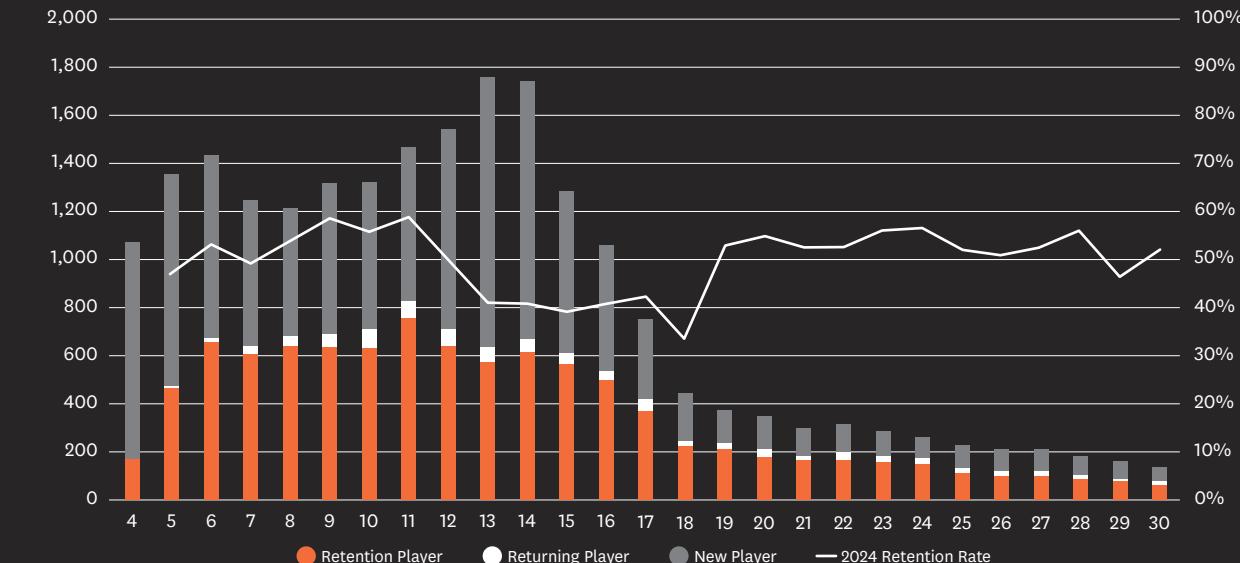
MEN AND BOYS

121,811 78%
OF TOTAL PLAYERS

BREAK DOWN²

NUMBER OF PLAYERS	% OF TOTAL NUMBER OF PLAYERS	AVERAGE RETENTION RATE (%)
JUNIOR GIRLS 22,030	27%	43%
YOUTH GIRLS 7,430	20%	46%
ADULT WOMEN 4,297	12%	58%

NEW AND RETURNING PARTICIPANTS³



TRENDS

The 2024 Club & Secondary School breakdown shows that more females joined rugby as 12-16 year olds than were retained from the previous season.

The four year trend shows the drop-off of female participants occurs at age 11 and 13.

We have more new 13 and 14 year olds entering the game than at any other age

Female player retention was 47% for the 2024 season, well below the 60% retention rate for males

Female playing numbers have grown by 70% in the past 10 years

75% of female club players are satisfied with their experience. The same % as males

RUGBY⁴

THE TOP 5 BARRIERS FOR W&G ENGAGEMENT IN RUGBY



THE TOP 10 ASPECTS WOMEN & GIRLS ENJOY MOST ABOUT RUGBY

1. PLAYING
2. TEAM CAMARADERIE AND SUPPORT
3. BEING WITH FRIENDS AND WHĀNAU
4. ATTRIBUTES OF RUGBY (I.E., PHYSICALITY, AGGRESSION, ETC.)
5. FUN
6. COMMUNITY CONNECTION
7. THE CHALLENGE, DEVELOPING AND IMPROVING
8. MEETING NEW PEOPLE
9. FITNESS
10. COMPETITION, SUCCESS, OR WINNING

WHAT FORMATS DO WOMEN AND GIRLS WANT?



TEENAGE GIRLS

6616

TEENAGE GIRLS (13-17 YEARS) PLAY IN THE CLUB OR SECONDARY SCHOOL SYSTEM, MAKING UP 26% OF TEENS PLAYING THE GAME

64%

13-YEAR-OLDS NEW TO THE GAME

41%

AV RETENTION FOR TEENS

TOP 4 MOTIVATORS FOR TEENAGE GIRLS TO PLAY SPORT⁶

FUN

FITNESS AND HEALTH

TO HANGOUT

WITH FRIENDS

TO PHYSICALLY

CHALLENGE MYSELF

TOP 5 REASONS TEENAGE GIRLS DISENGAGE WITH SPORT⁵



MOTIVATION

YOU ARE NO LONGER ABLE TO TAKE PART JUST FOR FUN



PRIORITY

TOO BUSY WITH SCHOOL WORK NOW



VALUE

IT'S NO LONGER IMPORTANT TO ME



PRESSURE

SPORT GOT TOO COMPETITIVE



OPPORTUNITY

NOT AS MANY OPPORTUNITIES TO TAKE PART



PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK

To grow Women and Girls rugby, we must offer experiences that reflect their unique motivations and needs. This guide provides a participation framework with example participation offerings, alongside a reflection tool. The examples in this guide are not intended to be exhaustive or fixed; the system will continue to evolve, and new activities and approaches are expected to emerge over time.

Why a Participation Framework?

While the Women and Girls Strategy initially recommended an overarching player pathway, a participation framework offers both the direction and flexibility needed to grow the game. Unlike a traditional pathway, often viewed as a linear route to performance, a framework allows for flexible, locally tailored approaches and does not assume a one-size-fits-all progression. This makes it more relevant and engaging for a wide range of participants and aspirations. It also recognises the need for local adaptability and the reality that Provincial Unions are at different stages in their development journey.

The Participation Framework has been adapted (with permission) from Sport NZ's pathways model and principles. The framework domains have been carefully customised for women and girls in rugby. It provides clear national guidance while enabling flexible, locally led delivery that supports growth across diverse communities.

Built around four key domains, the framework reflects the many ways women and girls enter, experience, and progress in rugby, whether playing casually with friends or aiming to become a future Black Fern.

The framework aims to support the system to:

- Create consistency nationally while adapting locally.
- Provide examples of appropriate offerings available at each stage of the participant journey.
- Offer experiences that genuinely meet a player's goals and needs at their current stage.
- Establish consistent language for planning, delivery, and evaluation.
- Recognise and value non-linear pathways.

Why a reflection Tool?

Unions differ in local context, player base, capabilities, staff capacity, and resources. The Reflection Tool allows each Provincial Union to evaluate their current participation offerings through a structured four-step process aligned with the Participation Framework. It helps Unions to:

- Capture a snapshot of player numbers, demographics, and context
- Map existing rugby activity across age groups and participation domains
- Identify strengths and gaps, assessing their relevance, impact, and development potential
- Prioritise key opportunities and define actions, partnerships, and timelines aligned with local goals.



PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK PRINCIPLES AND ENABLERS

Core Principles

The framework design is underpinned by the following principles:



Collaboration

A connected rugby system, where roles and responsibilities are clear, leads to better outcomes for all participants.



Individual Flexibility

Participants develop at different rates. Age and stage considerations are essential when shaping experiences and progression.



Participant-Centred

Transitions into, through, and out of rugby should reflect each player's motivations, confidence, abilities, and personal goals.



Locally-Led

Empowering unions, clubs, and schools to make decisions that reflect their local context and player needs is key to sustainable delivery.

The Participation Framework outlines **what** could be offered to ensure consistent and meaningful rugby experiences across the country. However, the quality of these experiences depends on the conditions that support them.

Core Enablers of Quality Experiences

To bring the framework to life in a way that truly reflects the needs and aspirations of women and girls, a set of core enablers must be in place. These enablers are inspired by best practice across the sport sector and create the conditions for safe, meaningful participation and foster a lifelong love of rugby:

• **QUALITY COACHES & OFFICIALS**

Skilled and supported coaches, referees, and volunteers who understand and respond to the needs of women and girls.

• **INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS**

Welcoming clubs, inclusive facilities, and team cultures where all participants feel they belong.

• **HAUORA**

A strong and visible focus on the unique physical, mental, emotional, and cultural well-being of women and girls.

• **WHĀNAU AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Whānau and communities actively supporting, volunteering, and role modelling positive behaviours to create safe, enjoyable, and supportive rugby environments.

• **RESOURCING AND INVESTMENT**

Sustainable investment, targeted resources, and local capability to support delivery at every level, including equitable access to uniforms, fields, training times, and facilities.

• **ACTIVE LISTENING**

Feedback and co-design platforms that ensure women and girls' voices shape their rugby experiences, designed for them, with them.

While this guide does not provide detailed guidance on how to implement each enabler, the interpretation and application of these remain critical to delivering quality participation. Provincial Unions are encouraged to draw upon NZ Rugby's growing collection of resources, training, and support to develop and embed these enablers within their local contexts. Much of NZ Rugby's ongoing support work is designed to assist with these enablers, helping unions effectively integrate them. Offerings should only be considered fully aligned with the framework when the complementary enablers are firmly in place.

WOMEN AND GIRLS PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK



UNDERSTANDING EACH DOMAIN

The framework is organised into four key domains that reflect the different stages and motivations women and girls experience as they engage with rugby. Participants may move in and out of these domains throughout their rugby journey and can participate in multiple domains simultaneously. This is intentionally non-linear to reflect the varied motivations, life stages, and commitments of women and girls in rugby.

It is important to note that this framework is not an exhaustive list of experiences. Rather, it is designed to be aspirational and inclusive, supporting and inspiring the development of opportunities that are shaped by local context, needs, and ambitions. Delivery is not the sole responsibility of any one organisation; instead, a broad network of partners contributes to providing a diverse range of offerings. The framework should be used as a guide to inform and inspire tailored approaches that meet the aspirations of women and girls in each community.

DOMAIN:

FOUNDATION



PURPOSE

Build a love of rugby through early experiences, modules, and Programmes that focus on enjoyment, skill development, and learning. This stage fosters progressive skill-building and game understanding, prioritising player development, confidence, competence, and safety over positions, tactics, or competition, laying the foundation for a lifelong love for the game.



WHO

Juniors, Youth and adults in early stages of rugby.



MOTIVATIONS

Fun, friendships, discovery, and learning.



COMMITMENT LEVEL

Casual sampling, 4-6 session programmes, through to season length commitment.



NEXT STEPS FOR PLAYERS

Participants can enter the Play or Compete domain based on age, confidence, ability, and/or aspiration.



RESPONSIBLE

Schools, Clubs, Community Groups, Provincial Unions, Sub Unions, Independent Providers



JUNIOR



HAVE A GO DAY

An introductory opportunity that welcomes newcomers to rugby in a fun, informal setting. Offering a no-pressure chance to try rugby skills and modified games without any commitment.

FESTIVALS

Rippa and Contact Festivals are fun, one-off community events that give kids more chances to play rugby in a friendly, family-focused environment. Juniors represent their schools, clubs, or local community groups and participate in one location where they can enjoy multiple games throughout the day with modified formats aligned to the Junior Rugby Framework. These festivals go beyond the game, with exciting additions like food trucks, fun activations, poster-making stations, and more. It's all about getting active, connecting with others, and celebrating the spirit of rugby together.

SCRUM DEVELOPMENT

Scrum development programmes teach strong, safe body positions and sound scrummaging technique, starting with individual positions and progressing to cohesive scrum units for competition. They will begin with Year 7/8 participants and continue through the teenage years to support girls entering the game later.

JUNIOR RUGBY

Participants learn and play season-long in line with the NZR junior rugby framework to progressively build skills, starting with non-contact to full contact, focusing on safety and enjoyment. Participants learn core skills like running, passing, safe tackling, and teamwork. Girls only grades are encouraged at all ages to create supportive spaces that build confidence and improve retention. **Tackle Clinic**, which teaches safe tackling technique, is part of the junior rugby framework and compulsory for Year 3/U8s, but should be offered to all new participants up to Year 8/U13 where required.

YOUTH



HAVE A GO DAYS

An introductory opportunity that welcomes newcomers to rugby in a fun, informal setting. Offering a no-pressure chance to try rugby skills and modified games without any commitment.

INTRODUCTORY PROGRAMME*

An introductory programme is ideal for new participants or those who haven't had the chance to develop core rugby skills. It supports learning through fun, modified games that build confidence, fitness, and basic skills like passing, catching, and game understanding. Whether contact or non-contact, the programme prepares participants to confidently transition into their next rugby experience, whether that's delivered through their school, club, or local community group.

CONTACT READY

A 6 session, introductory programme targeted at girls who are interested in playing contact rugby. It focuses on building safety and confidence by teaching the basics of correct contact technique particularly tackling, taking the ball into contact, and landing safely. Designed for those new, in their first year of rugby or transitioning from non-contact, this programme helps participants catch up and feel prepared to transition into contact rugby with confidence.

SCRUM DEVELOPMENT

Scrum Development Programmes teach participants how to use strong, safe body positions and correct scrummaging techniques. It should be offered to participants new to scrummaging.

SKILL DEVELOPMENT MODULES*

Girls only skill-specific modules focus on developing key areas such as post-tackle, lineout, kicking, and scrum. Modules can be delivered across 2-3 sessions, acting as a supplementary learning opportunity, providing a targeted and supportive way to prepare participants by effectively enhancing specific skills.

YOUTH RUGBY*

Participants aged 13 to 14 continue their season long development transitioning to a full-sized field and are progressively introduced to scrums, positions, and tactical aspects of the game through formally organised competitions and tournaments.

SENIOR



HAVE A GO DAYS

An introductory opportunity that welcomes newcomers to rugby in a fun, informal setting. Offering a no-pressure chance to try rugby skills and modified games without any commitment.

Think Try T1 Rugby!

INTRODUCTORY SERIES*

A flexible series designed for new participants, providing a safe and social environment to build confidence, develop core skills, and enjoy rugby. The series emphasizes gradual skill development, starting with the basics and progressively introducing modified, low-pressure games. Sessions can be adapted for T1 Rugby or modified contact rugby formats (7s, 10s, XVs) following Game On principles, tailored to each group's comfort and experience levels. This series offers a positive early rugby experience and a safe, more confident transition into ongoing club rugby, such as social series, social grade, or development teams.

CONSIDERATIONS

The series could be delivered in two phases and should allow for flexibility (missed sessions):

- Phase 1: Learn & Train (4-6 weeks) – Focus on core skills, game basics, and safe contact.
- Phase 2: Train & Play (Optional 4 weeks) – Introduces modified, low-pressure games to reinforce learning in a supportive, game-like setting.

SCRUM DEVELOPMENT

Scrum Development Programmes teach participants how to use strong, safe body positions and correct scrummaging techniques. It should be offered to participants new to scrummaging.

SKILL DEVELOPMENT MODULES*

Women-only skill-specific modules focus on developing key areas such as post-tackle, lineout, kicking, and scrum. Modules can be delivered across 2-3 sessions, acting as a supplementary learning opportunity, providing a targeted and supportive way to prepare participants by effectively enhancing specific skills.



*Offerings marked with * are not yet common but show strong potential.*

We welcome opportunities to explore and pilot these together.

DOMAIN:

PLAY



PURPOSE

To grow and diversify the player base by offering more flexible, less formal formats, focusing on enjoyment and playing rugby with friends. These include non-contact options for all abilities and social contact formats for those with some experience, providing accessible and appealing opportunities for a wider audience to enjoy rugby on their own terms.



WHO

Teens and adults who want a non-contact version of rugby, or those with some contact experience looking for a fun, social, and low-pressure way to play.



MOTIVATIONS

Fun, fitness, flexibility, personal development, social connection.



COMMITMENT LEVEL

Participant-driven, allowing for occasional to regular involvement based on individual interests and availability. Can be 6-8 week blocks to short seasons.



NEXT STEPS FOR PLAYERS

Participants may move into more structured competitive rugby or continue enjoying flexible formats as desired.



RESPONSIBLE

Schools, Clubs, Community Groups, Provincial Unions, Sub Unions, and Independent Providers.



YOUTH



FESTIVALS

A fun and inclusive event focused on participation rather than competition and can be delivered through tournament weeks for schools and independently for clubs and community groups. Festivals can feature composite teams made up of participants from different clubs or schools to support access and inclusion. They can include T1 Rugby, 7s, 10s along with fun sideline activities and music in a relaxed atmosphere. The emphasis is on enjoyment, learning, and teamwork.

SOCIAL SERIES*

A Social Series is a short, flexible block of sessions combining fun, fitness, skill development, training and modified games in a low-pressure, social environment. Sessions can be contact or non-contact and are tailored to the group's size and experience. All participants play together within the club or group, with no travel involved. This offering supports players to build skills and confidence at their own pace.

Think, a 6- 8 week block on a weeknight during summer!

SOCIAL GRADE*

A flexible, organised offering designed for participants with some rugby experience who want to continue developing their skills in a welcoming, less intense environment. It suits anyone seeking enjoyable games and light competition without the pressure of high-level play. Played as T1 Rugby or contact rugby (with prior contact experience), Social Grade matches can be delivered either internally within a club by splitting players into teams or in fixtures against other clubs/schools. A Social Grade provides a consistent, lower-commitment option that balances competition with a relaxed, social atmosphere. It can stand alone as its own grade as well as provide a step into a development club grade.

Think, T1 Social grade, 8-10 weeks season!

SENIOR



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CONSIDERATION

A contact Social Grade requires participants to have prior contact experience for safety. For teenagers, Contact Ready is an effective way to build confidence and prepare to join. Adults who are new or returning are encouraged to begin with learn/train-only sessions before entering games. It's important that Social Grade offerings stay true to player motivations, social connection, fun, and community while supporting safe and confident participation.

*Offerings marked with * are not yet common but show strong potential.
We welcome opportunities to explore and pilot these together.*



DOMAIN:

COMPETE



PURPOSE

Provide structured, formal competition opportunities and programmes at local, regional, and national levels. Designed for players with drive and aspiration, as well as those who simply love competition, these offerings support skill development and personal growth through competitive play, while providing opportunities to represent clubs, schools, or PU's. This domain includes scheduled training, development, and competitions, offering clear progression routes for all who seek them.



WHO

Youth and adults committed to regular training and competition, seeking structured and competitive rugby environments.



MOTIVATIONS

Aspiration, competitive drive, skill development, fitness and friends, A love for the spirit and challenge of competitive rugby.



COMMITMENT LEVEL

Higher commitment with regular training sessions, and adherence to competition schedules.



NEXT STEPS FOR PLAYERS

Participants with elite potential may transition to the Perform domain; others continue in competitive rugby or may shift to Play depending on goals and circumstances.



RESPONSIBLE

Schools, Clubs, Community Groups, Provincial Unions, Sub Unions, Regional Councils, Māori Rugby Councils, Independent Providers.





LOCAL COMPETITIONS FOR TEENAGE GIRLS

The offering for teenage girls can be school-based, club-based, or a hybrid model ensuring participants have options, particularly where school rugby isn't available. It is also important to include those outside traditional school systems by providing access to structured and supportive rugby environments. This requires a collaborative approach between schools and clubs. The ideal scenario is for teenage girls to play within their age group and alongside peers for as long as possible, prioritising environments where they can stay connected with friends and get regular, meaningful minutes on the field.

- **FESTIVALS**

provide single day events through pool-style scheduling, creating plenty of participation and variety.

- **LOCAL SCHOOL COMPETITIONS**

offer teenagers the chance to play with their friends, train in a familiar environment, and proudly represent their school.

- **LOCAL CLUB COMPETITIONS***

provide a space to make new friends, grow, develop, and represent their club, especially for those without access to school rugby or who are no longer enrolled in education.

Both school and club competitions are ideal for participants with the confidence and competence to play the full version of the game. Competitions should be played under teenage DSLVs (Domestic Safety Law Variations) to maintain appropriate safety standards. However, Game On principles may be applied where necessary to keep the game accessible, flexible, and safe for all.

Competitions can be delivered in a variety of formats, including 7s, 10s, and 15s, giving participants meaningful opportunities to represent their school or club, develop their skills, and enjoy the game in a supportive environment.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL SECONDARY SCHOOL EVENTS

This offering is played at a Cup (regional) and Championship (national) levels. These are New Zealand Secondary Schools (NZSS) sanctioned events, where schools compete during designated tournament week windows in the school calendar.

Cup competitions are held regionally, while Championship events bring together top teams from across the country. Provincial Unions (PUs) may support schools in their qualification pathways or propose to host these events through the annual NZSS sanctioning process, which is led by NZR.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CLUB COMPETITIONS*

An opportunity for players to represent their club in cross-boundary, regional, and national events. Designed to introduce variety, fresh experiences, and new competitive challenges, these competitions will support player development and long-term engagement in the game. They can also help fill gaps where school-based opportunities are limited or unavailable, ensuring more players have access to regular, meaningful competition. Further design and consultation will inform how and when these offerings could be introduced.

MĀORI RUGBY U18 REGIONAL PROGRAMME

Maori Rugby provides opportunities for experienced Wahine to continue their development in rugby as well as strengthen their connection to te ao Maori. These programmes are open to all registered wahine players and are offered through local Maori Councils and NZ Rugby. These opportunities may include regional marae based camps through to regional and national selection (please add macrons)

U16 PU REPRESENTATIVE PROGRAMMES

The U16s is a development-focused environment designed to identify and grow high-potential players through provincial union age-grade pathways. It provides a nationwide platform for talent identification and tracking, offering quality coaching, skill refinement, positional exploration, and an introduction to representative rugby through development camps and games. The programme also supports players to explore and develop across all six high-performance pillars mental performance, health, personal & professional development, physical performance, leadership, and rugby laying a strong foundation for progression to higher levels of the pathway.

SENIOR



FESTIVAL

A multi-team event offering enjoyable matches. Teams play games through pool-style scheduling, creating plenty of participation and variety. The off field environment is social and inclusive, activities that bring players, families, and supporters together.

DEVELOPMENT GRADE WOMEN'S CLUB RUGBY

This competition is designed for returning and developing participants. It serves as an ideal grade for those working toward Premier Grade rugby, as well as for participants seeking a competitive experience without the full commitment and demands of Premier Grade. Games are ideally played under full DSLVs (Domestic Safety Law Variations); however, Game On principles may be applied where necessary to ensure the competition remains accessible, flexible, and safe.

The competition provides participants with the opportunity to represent their club, have meaningful competition and development with clear progression into Premier grade rugby for those who seek it.

Premier Grade Women's Club Rugby

The top tier of competitive club rugby, Premier Grade provides a structured platform for participants to represent their club in regular, season-long competition. This level of play emphasises player development, team cohesion, and often serves as a key pathway to provincial representation.

Matches are played under full DSLVs (Domestic Safety Law Variations), including contested scrums and the requirement for qualified front row replacements ensuring a safe, high-quality standard of play. Refer to Age to play policy for any U18 consideration.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CLUB COMPETITIONS*

Creating opportunities for participants to represent their clubs in cross-boundary, regional, and national events. Aiming to offer variety, fresh experiences, and new competitive challenges that support player development and long-term engagement in the game. Think U85 Club Comp!

REPRESENTATIVE FIXTURES BELOW FPC

Representative rugby below FPC serves different purposes depending on the union.

For unions with FPC teams, a development or “B” team playing in organised representative fixtures can provide more players with valuable game time and help nurture future talent. For non-FPC unions with strong, thriving club competitions, a development representative team offers meaningful fixtures or tournaments that allow players to regularly compete against others of similar ability, fostering growth and improvement. Provincial Unions may start by organising competitive fixtures against unions of similar ability and development stage to support player progression and ensure competitive balance before progressing to a more structured competition.

CONSIDERATION

Wondering if your union is ready for a representative team? Check out the helpful considerations in the appendix.

*Offerings marked with * are not yet common but show strong potential.*

We welcome opportunities to explore and pilot these together.



DOMAIN:

PERFORM

The Performance Domain consists of three stages, aligned to NZR HP Strategy.

- Emerging: Early-stage national development, focused on athletes transitioning from competitive rugby into high-performance environments.
- Development: Advanced stage, typically involving contracted athletes within Super Rugby Aupiki or other elite domestic structures.
- Elite: Highest level of performance, including national team representation (e.g. Black Ferns, Black Ferns, Sevens).

This guide focuses on the Emerging player stage, where athletes are building the skills, habits, and mindset required for high performance. Development and Elite stages are managed directly by Super Rugby Clubs and New Zealand Rugby.



PURPOSE

Domestic, national, and international competitions and programmes focus on the development and performance of nationally identified athletes who demonstrate the attributes, ambition, and attitude to excel on the world stage NZR Women's High Performance Plan. These initiatives aim to grow and support regionally and nationally identified athletes with the potential and aspiration to perform at the highest levels. Through targeted programmes and competitions, participants develop the technical, physical, and mental skills required to succeed at the elite level.



WHO

Aspiring high-performance athletes, who have been regionally, or nationally identified for their potential to compete at elite levels. This includes those in national squads, development programmes, or top representative pathways.

- Emerging: Demonstrating potential in the physical, psychological and skill attributes needed to perform on the international stage.
- Development: Demonstrating international potential but not yet tested or successful on the international stage.
- Elite: Internationally world-class athletes producing sustained international performances.



MOTIVATIONS

Those who desire to represent their country, or region at the highest level.



COMMITMENT LEVEL

High commitment to training schedules, nutrition and recovery, strength and conditioning, skill development, and teamwork, with a focus on maximising performance in competitive environments.



Those selected will transition to Development or Elite Programmes and competitions, alternatively will be retained via Competitive rugby.



RESPONSIBLE

Emerging: Provincial Unions, Regional Councils, NZR

Development: Super Rugby Clubs, NZR

Elite: NZR

YOUTH



U18 PU REPRESENTATIVE PROGRAMMES

These regional programmes aim to identify and develop high potential emerging talent through meaningful competition, fixtures and development camps. Players have the chance to represent their provincial union while developing and advancing across all six of the high performance pillars (mental performance, health, personal & professional, physical, leadership and rugby). These also offer a nationwide platform for talent identification, serving as an important milestone in the player development pathway.

PROVINCIAL UNION ACADEMIES

These academies aim to identify, recruit and develop high-potential players who demonstrate the attributes needed to perform in the high-performance system. Designed for selected emerging talent, the academies are delivered through Provincial Unions with NZR investment. They support top talent with specialised training and development aligned to the national high-performance curriculum, which includes the six high-performance pillars. Primarily focused on talent identification and preparing future Super Rugby contenders, training is structured outside school or work hours to support off-field growth alongside on-field development.

NZR AGE GRADE U18 DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

NZR offers a national U18 programme targeted at emerging talent. This age-grade development programme provides an understanding of high-performance foundations, exposure to a performance environment, and off-field development. The camps are designed to prepare players for national representation, with a focus on the six pillars of player development. They serve as key stepping stones towards FPC, Super Rugby Aupiki, national teams, and future professional rugby environments.

NZR U18S SEVENS

NZR offers opportunities for selected players to develop through Sevens offerings that provide high-intensity, competitive Sevens environments, and expose players to international standards and talent identification opportunities. This is achieved through a range of domestic and international events that can provide a pathway into national Sevens development programmes and senior representation.

SENIOR



EMERGING

FARAH PALMER CUP

Premier women's provincial competition, the Farah Palmer Cup offers a high-performance environment for emerging female players. It provides a crucial step in the national pathway, bridging domestic rugby with higher honours such as Super Rugby Aupiki and Black Ferns selection. The competition challenges athletes to refine positional understanding, physical performance, and leadership in a professional setting.

DEVELOPMENT

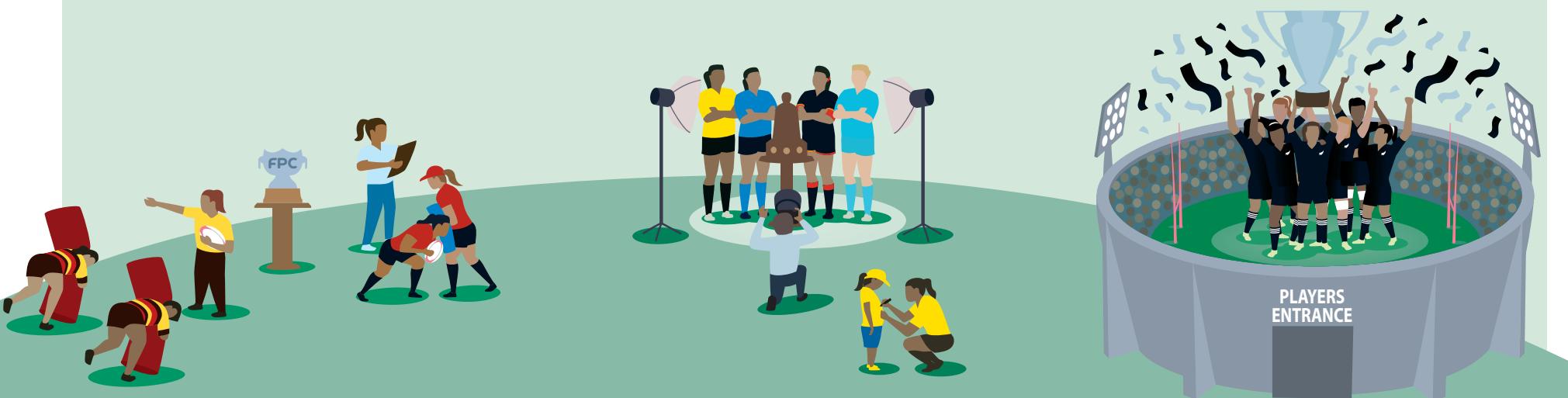
DOMESTIC COMPETITIONS AND DEVELOPMENT

High-quality, development-focused playing environment that supports athlete development, talent identification, and progression towards national teams. This looks like, national Development Contracts , NZ U20 Camps, BFXV / BF Dev 7s, Ignite and Super Rugby Aupiki.

ELITE

ELITE INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIONS

National representative rugby, international competitions that provide regular, high-level playing opportunities. These competitions support player development pathways, contribute to global rankings, and serve as qualification routes for pinnacle events such as the Women's Rugby World Cup and Olympic Games. This looks like, Black Ferns, Black Ferns 7s & Hubs



APPENDIX

This appendix contains items that may require further explanation or clarification;

FORMATS OF RUGBY

Formats are defined by World Rugby in law and amplified by NZR through Domestic Safety Law Variations (DSLVs). The codified formats in New Zealand are as follows:

JUNIOR RUGBY FRAMEWORK (CURRENTLY KNOWN AS SMALL BLACKS)

This framework provides the learning pathway for contact rugby, commencing with Rippa at U6 and transitioning to tackle from U8. Critical technical and tactical skills are introduced in a scaffolded way, aligned with children's developmental needs, to encourage engagement, enjoyment, and positive learning outcomes. It ranges from 7-a-side on a modified field to 13-a-side on a modified field. Children play under restricted age bands and, in some cases, weight bands to promote balanced and safe competitions.

RIPPA RUGBY

Rippa is a non-contact game designed for juniors up to 10 years of age. It provides an entry-level experience of the basic characteristics of the game, such as passing the ball backwards, running forward, working in small numbers, defending, and preparing for tackle by targeting the hips, where the flags are positioned.

T1 RUGBY

T1 Rugby is a non-contact format that fully reflects the unique characteristics of rugby, including lineouts, scrums, kicking, and the breakdown, while remaining simple to play. With an emphasis on fun, fitness, inclusion, and time optimisation, T1 offerings start at u12s, and is great for youth and adults. It serves as a valuable alternative offering or transitional format.

SEVENS

Sevens is a fast, skilful, and exciting codified summer version of rugby, played on a full field with some DSLVs in place for different age groups. As one of the fastest-growing formats of the game, Sevens is typically offered from U15s onwards to participants who are confident and competent in core safety techniques such as ball carrying, tackling, ruck contesting, and three-person scrum engagement. To manage physical demands, Sevens can be modified (for example, using a half field), particularly for younger age groups. It is especially popular when delivered as a festival-style event, either over a single day or across a series of weekends during warmer months, with music, food trucks, tents, and activations creating a vibrant, whānau-friendly atmosphere.

TENS

Tens is a codified winter version of rugby played on a full field, with some DSLVs in place for different ages. It is a useful format for Provincial Unions seeking to grow contact rugby for teenagers and adults and can also serve as a supplementary offering for clubs or schools that already have a Premier team playing 15s. With fewer participants required both on the field and in the wider team, Tens makes it easier for clubs and schools to establish and sustain season-long involvement or for festival style events.

XVs

XVs is the full version of rugby, played from U15s onwards by teenagers and adults. It is played under various DSLVs, with a key distinction between Premier and Non-Premier competitions. Premier competitions feature contested scrums and regulated front-row replacements, with squads of up to 22 participants. These competitions are vital for providing players with the level of challenge and exposure needed to progress through performance pathways and into higher honours. Non-Premier competitions are played under Game On principles, which offer greater flexibility around scrum contesting, team size, playing time, and rolling substitutions. This format is ideal for Provincial Unions looking to grow school or club competitions and support sustainable participation.

ALTERNATIVE FORMATS

Rugby continues to evolve, so other formats may emerge over time and become codified, for example, Beach Rugby or Tackle 5s

PARTICIPATION STRUCTURES AND CONSIDERATIONS

AGE CATEGORIES



Junior: Participants aged 5–12 years (School Year 0 – 8)



Youth: Participants aged 13–18 years (School Year 9 – 13)



Adults/Seniors: Participants aged 18 years and above

RECOMMENDED AGE BANDING AND FLEXIBILITY IN COMMUNITY RUGBY (UP TO U19)

Participants up to U19 should ideally participate in their appropriate age band. For example, a 9-year-old should play with other 9-year-olds in a Year 5/U10 offering. In some communities, additional grouping considerations such as weight banding may also be valued and supported.

To ensure access and flexibility, NZR's Age to Play Age Grade Rugby policy allows participants to play up or down under certain conditions:

- Up to Year 7/U12, playing up is limited to a two-year window.
- At teenage levels, the flexibility is broader to reflect the greater physical and social variance during adolescence.

SENIOR CLUB RUGBY

Senior Club Rugby is for participants aged 18 and above. Participants aged 16–17 can play in senior rugby competitions, but only where there is no other offering for them and they have met required screening and policy requirements.

ADAPTING FORMATS FOR COMMUNITY NEEDS

In cases where player numbers are limited, competition organisers are encouraged to adapt team sizes, field dimensions, and match formats rather than stretch age banding policies.

For example, it is not essential for a community to field 15-a-side teams at a particular age group if doing so forces participants to play too far outside their age range. Smaller formats such as 10s may offer a more appropriate and sustainable alternative.

GIRLS-ONLY GRADES AND TEAMS

Under rugby safety policy, mixed-gender rugby is permitted up to Year 8/U13, with the option for girls to transition into girls-only teams or competitions at any point. This option is increasingly encouraged to enhance girls' experiences in the game.

Girls-only teams play a vital role, building confidence and fostering a sense of safety and belonging. In smaller or more geographically spread unions, establishing girls-only grades may be challenging. In these cases, a girls-only team provides a strong starting point with the potential to grow into full grades and regular competition as numbers increase.

In some communities, there can be concern that forming girls-only grades may reduce numbers in mixed grades, where girls have often helped to keep teams viable. While this is a valid consideration, starting with girls-only teams provides a balanced solution that supports the growth of the girls' game and maintains overall participation.

CO-ORDINATION OF YOUTH RUGBY

The coordination and delivery of teenage girls' rugby should follow a collaborative approach. Without this, there is a risk of fragmenting the player base and forcing girls to choose between representing their school or their club. Additionally, this lack of alignment can lead to player loading issues when individuals attempt to participate in both environments simultaneously.

The optimal model involves schools, clubs and unions working together in alignment. This approach maximises playing opportunities while avoiding conflicting demands on participants.

Where appropriate, hybrid competitions in which school and club teams compete together can create positive, meaningful experiences. To support this, formal collaboration is essential. This may be best achieved through competition regulations and Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between organising committees and relevant school bodies (e.g. College Sport Auckland). Such agreements can help ensure a coordinated, player-centred approach to the growth and development of girls' rugby.

COMPOSITE TEAMS

Composite (combined) teams are commonly used when there are insufficient player numbers to form a full team under a single identity. This approach is positive and inclusive, as it enables participants to participate where a standalone team may not otherwise be possible.

However, composite teams can undermine the value of identity-based representations, such as playing for one's own school, which is an important aspect of team sport. Therefore, the use of composite teams should be carefully considered and permitted only where they provide genuine playing opportunities, not as a means to combine top participants for competitive advantage.

In recognition of this, some National Secondary School events do not allow composite teams, to preserve the integrity and identity of those competitions. Conversely, Cup and Carnival competitions tend to have more flexible entry criteria, making them more suitable for composite participation.

Our position: Composite teams are a valuable tool for enabling participation and should be supported where they create access to the game, but they should not be used to manipulate competitive balance. Their inclusion should be guided by clear regulations that uphold fairness, integrity, and the spirit of the competition. While we support the use of composite teams, we recommend that guidance be given to those identities to help grow participation, with the aim of forming their own teams.

HOW DO WE THINK ABOUT PARTICIPATION?

Participation is made up of three main components, all of which need to be in harmony to provide a quality and engaging experience. It starts with the participant at the centre. The three components are **Design**, **Delivery** and **Environment**.

All of these play an important part in the quality of an experience for a participant to engage them and maintain their love of the game. The age, needs, and motivations of each participant provide the challenge of ensuring the three components are suitably matched. The experiences for a 5 year old player, new to the game, are clearly quite different to an aspiring teenager or senior player. The **Design** of the experience is therefore critical.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROVINCIAL UNIONS DEVELOPING ADULT WOMEN'S REPRESENTATIVE TEAMS (BELOW FPC)

When thinking about including an adult representative team offering in your Provincial Union, consider the following:

PLAYER DEMAND

- What do your players want and need, and do you have aspirational players not already involved in teenage programmes?
- Have you gathered feedback from players to understand their goals and motivations?

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

- Do you have strong U16 and U18 girls' development or representative programmes running annually?

COMMUNITY GAME & PLAYER DEPTH

- Do you have quality and sustainable teenage competitions that flow into and can support a stable and balanced adult club competition?
- Is there a clear and supported transition pathway from school to club?

DELIVERY CAPABILITY

- Do you have the facilities, personnel, and resources needed to support player improvement and raise the quality of women's rugby in the region?
- Have you considered whether in-season development programmes are needed to give aspirational players and coaches opportunities to improve their skills through higher-quality coaching than may be available in their club team?
- Have you considered: coaching, support staff, referees, changing rooms, training space, game venues, and match scheduling?

PLAYING OPPORTUNITIES

- Is there quality competition available for the team?

Quality refers to matches that sufficiently challenge and test players, creating a sense of nervousness, excitement, and pressure to perform.

If this is not available or affordable, consider other options such as festivals, development programmes, or alternate formats.

Competition length, demand, and focus should balance the study, work, and family commitments of players and staff.

GLOSSARY

Below are definitions of terms used throughout this document for context.

CODIFIED

A codified format of rugby refers to a format that has rules, laws and guidelines that are standardised, documented and officially recognised.

COMMUNITY GROUPS

Community groups deliver rugby outside of traditional club or school settings. These can include Pacific community groups, marae-based teams, or grassroots initiatives that use rugby to connect, engage and support their communities.

REGIONAL COUNCILS

There are three Regional Youth Councils across the country: Northern Regional Council, Hurricanes Youth Council and South Island Junior & Teenage Committee. Each differs slightly in representation but generally includes provincial unions, secondary schools and college sport representatives. These councils are tasked, and partially funded by NZR, to deliver regional representative boys' and girls' competitions (7s and XVIs) from U16s to U19s. Some also run senior competitions (U85s, Women's Development and 7s) to provide additional opportunities; these are not NZR funded.

INDEPENDENT PROVIDERS

Sanctioned third-party providers granted authority under Domestic Safety Law Variations (DSLVs) to deliver rugby events such as festivals and tournaments.

GRADES

Grades are categories used to group participants based on factors such as age, ability, motivation or weight. For example, an 'Year 10/U15s grade' groups participants under 15 years of age, a 'social grade', groups players by motivation, while a weight-restricted grade groups participants within a certain weight range to ensure fair competition. Grades help create balanced and appropriate playing environments tailored to the needs and development levels of participants.

**PARTICIPATION FRAMEWORK
VS PARTICIPATION PATHWAY**

- Participation Pathway: A structured, often linear progression that guides individuals through different stages of involvement and skill development.
- Participation Framework: A flexible, adaptable model that supports various ways to engage, accommodating diverse needs without assuming a fixed route or pathway to performance.

MODULE

A module is a short learning experience, usually one to two sessions, focused on a specific skill or component of a wider topic. For example, learning how to perform a scrum in rugby. It is a targeted, focused skill-building block.

PROGRAMME

A programme is a learning experience, typically four to six sessions, with clear objectives to develop a range of skills. It often uses games and activities to teach multiple parts of the game, such as tackling, ball handling and passing. It is designed for more comprehensive skill development.

SERIES

A series can last around six to ten weeks and is flexible with a lower commitment level. It blends learning, playing and training, making it ideal for participants who want a structured but adaptable approach to participation.

TRANSITION PROGRAMME

A programme that provides a bridge or ‘on ramp’ between two stages, for example, moving from non-contact to contact rugby. An example is Contact Ready.

Fixture

A fixture refers to a single scheduled game or a small number of games between teams. Unlike a full competition, which involves multiple rounds, standings or a season-long structure, fixtures are usually standalone or part of a short campaign.

Competition

Season-long competitions where participants commit to playing regularly as part of a team. This involves a higher level of commitment and focuses on competing, often with scheduled matches across a full season.

REGIONAL COMPETITION

VS LOCAL COMPETITION

- Local Competition: Competitions held within a region, typically with minimal travel and focused on grassroots participation – for example, school versus school or club versus club within the same area.
- Regional Competition: Representative teams from larger geographic areas, such as provincial unions, competing at a higher level – for example, Auckland versus Waikato.



