

Learning about what works in Phase Two of the Mayor of London's Sport Unites Programme

Spotlight: London EmpowerHER (RFU)

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“I get to be me, it's just brilliant. Running, being muddy, being dirty, running hard. I love it.” (Participant, Redbridge)

“This brilliant initiative will give young women a great grounding in rugby, help them to fall in love with sport and learn new skills both on and off the pitch. With the Rugby World Cup this year, this is a great opportunity to inspire young women and girls to get active and help ensure they grow up in a safer and fairer London.” (Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London)

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Background

The Women's Rugby World Cup in 2025 offers an unbeatable platform to motivate and inspire women and girls to take up the sport in larger numbers than ever before. Rugby Football Union (RFU) have seized this opportunity to grow the women's game, setting an ambitious target of reaching 100k registered female players by 2027.

The London EmpowerHER project aimed to contribute towards growing the game in London, building on the capital's status as one of the World Cup's host cities. It aimed to engage women and girls in non-contact rugby in community venues, including schools, led by local third sector organisations. The project piloted a partnership delivery model that brought together rugby clubs, community partners and schools. The aspiration was to build a pathway that enabled women and girls to move easily from taster sessions, to after school or weekend sessions, finally to playing at a club.

The project was a partnership initiative between RFU and the Mayor of London and tested out the new approach in two London boroughs, Brent and Redbridge. It aimed to reach women and girls from underserved communities, promoting physical fitness while also helping them to develop skills that would be important later in life.

London EmpowerHER was also committed to supporting London's anti-violence against women campaign, by spreading awareness and education and was underpinned by the rugby values of Teamwork, Respect, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship.

What happened?

London EmpowerHER launched by Red Roses legend Maggie Alphonsi at Eton Manor Rugby Club in February 2024. The launch was followed by a training session for over 40 girls from Redbridge and Brent.

The GLA's Sport Team worked with the RFU to select the delivery partners for each of the two boroughs. The following partnerships were selected to deliver the pilot.

In Redbridge: Saracen's Sports Foundation and Newark Youth London (who later withdrew because of capacity issues)

In Brent: London Irish Foundation and Jason Roberts Foundation

Neither of the two areas were able to deliver the model as initially envisaged, because of difficulties in maintaining the involvement of a third sector partner in Redbridge, or in Brent, the lack of a suitable local rugby club that worked with women and girls. However, in both cases, partnerships and local networks ensured that London EmpowerHER reached large numbers of women and girls, as described in the next section, even if the pathway looked slightly different in each borough.

The partners delivered rugby taster sessions in schools, either as a timetabled PE class, or else as a lunchtime or after-school session. In Redbridge, London EmpowerHER was delivered in six schools and in Brent seven schools were involved.

Alongside these school sessions, regular community based sessions and four festivals / tournaments were also held at community rugby clubs, to both broaden the project's reach and strengthen links with local clubs. These events typically included not only opportunities to play, but also sessions with inspiring speakers, such as professional women rugby players.



What has been the impact?

“It makes me feel good, physically and mentally. Gives me confidence, I’m learning skills, I love the teamwork.”

(Participant, Redbridge)

“(When a boy said girls can’t play rugby) “it encouraged me to do better and show him a girl can do whatever she wants.”

(Participant, Brent)

A large, new, diverse group of women and girls have engaged with rugby through London EmpowerHER:

- **2,641** women and girls have participated
- Between **70% and 80%** of participants were from minority ethnic communities
- **80% of participants have consistently engaged** in opportunities to play rugby, i.e. on an ongoing basis.
- At Saracens Foundation and Jason Roberts Foundation **55-60%** of participants had never played before and at London Irish Foundation, **no participants had played before.**

As well as reaching large numbers, London EmpowerHER is making a difference to some of the women and girls who are taking part. Benefits described by participants included:

- increased self confidence
- feeling an impact on fitness levels
- valuing teamwork
- stronger connections and friendships between women and girls.



What have been the challenges?

“We had several occasions where teachers had reported in as sick on the morning of the session and the school had cancelled the session with the coach already on site.” (London Irish Foundation Final Report)

“(Before EmpowerHER) I thought rugby was about fighting. Now I think it’s fun.” (Participant, Brent)

London EmpowerHER has encountered a number of challenges, too, some of which relate to capacity and practical issues, while others are about perceptions of rugby, as well as wider barriers to girls’ participation in sport. These challenges are set out below.

- **Practical issues** relating particularly to playing rugby in school settings, such as in the example above. These include the availability of staff, timetabling issues, the late cancellation of sessions to accommodate Christmas activities and lack of the right kit, including boots.
- A **shortage of spaces to play** (both in schools and in the community) with the right facilities (such as toilets and changing rooms), especially for activities out of school hours
- The **capacity** of some community based partners to engage in the project and delivery of activities for local communities
- Little knowledge or experience of rugby, and **some preconceptions** about the sport, as highlighted in the quote from a young woman, above (in schools as well as among women and girls).
- Wider concerns about the **barriers to girls taking part in sport**, including:
 - **Personal safety**, including when using public transport - girls often prefer the places they go for their activities and fun to be within walking distance, which is difficult when there is no local club (as in the case of Brent).
 - Reluctance to take part in activities that **do not involve their friendship group**.
 - **The attitude of boys**, some of whom remain scornful or critical about girls’ abilities.



What helps?

“Seeing girls loving the sport is amazing, it keeps us going.” (Volunteer, Redbridge)

In both boroughs, partners were tackling some of these challenges using a range of strategies, including:

- **Involving the right people** – supportive, interested teachers, great coaches and dedicated volunteers
- **Engaging with parents/communities** who have no history with rugby to challenge stereotypes and promote the benefits to women and girls
- Supporting women and girls to make the transition from school to club by offering a **range of opportunities** in different settings
- **Addressing concerns** about travel and personal safety by creating a safe and empowering environment for girls to play
- Actively welcoming and working with **friendship groups**
- Identifying **local hubs** in areas with no club (for example by working with community organisations with facilities)
- **Showcasing role models** that look like the women and girls they want to involve, as they can play a key role in providing inspiration and modelling what’s possible.

What are the key lessons?

“Girls came back with trophies, stories – they were talking about it for days.” (Head of PE, Brent)

London EmpowerHER has highlighted several key learning points that relate not only to similar rugby based developments, but also to wider place-based sports initiatives.

- **The local context** influences success, particularly a place's rugby history and infrastructure - is it a 'rugby borough/town'?
- **Community organisations can be great partners**, but they often lack capacity, and building the relationships and trust that underpin community initiatives **takes time**
- **A flexible partnership model** evolved over the course of the pilot, which contains two key elements:
 - community partners working alongside clubs and schools, with the best placed organisation in the area taking the lead;
 - pathway/range of diverse opportunities for women and girls to participate, engage, play and progress

- **Culture and history of clubs:** *‘Navigating the politics of a 100 year old rugby club is challenging. We do have their support, but it still takes time to shift mindsets and ensure the club is set up for girls and women.’* (Volunteer, Redbridge)
- **Festivals & tournaments** play an important role – not just for the games, but for the inspiring activities around these
- **Tackling wider, societal barriers** is key – a theme which ran through the project was the larger issue about how best to support women and girls to continue to be active outside/post school.

What next?

“We’re not just looking to develop a rugby player, we’re looking to develop the person as well.” (RFU staff member)

The RFU and the Mayor of London are working together to build on the lessons from the pilot, as set out above, to ensure that rugby in London is well-placed to make the most of the growth in interest that is likely to follow the World Cup. This will also ensure that London’s women and girls, including those from underserved communities, can enjoy the benefits that playing rugby brings, not just in terms of fitness and fun, but also in building their confidence and potential as young leaders.

