



Outcomes and Lessons from London EmpowerHER

Final Evaluation & Learning Report, NDTi, February 2025



National Development Team for **Inclusion**

Thank you to:

London EmpowerHER delivery partners in Redbridge and Brent (Saracens Sport Foundation, Jason Roberts Foundation and London Irish Foundation) for sharing their time, experiences, evidence and extending a welcome to our team to observe their activities and opportunities for women and girls to learn about and engage in non-contact rugby; to the women and girls and local community partners (schools and rugby clubs) who also shared their own experiences and aspirations; and to the funding partners Rugby Football Union (RFU) and the GLA Sport Team for commissioning this evaluation and learning exercise.

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Glossary of abbreviations

GLA – Greater London Authority

NDTi – National Development Team for Inclusion

RFU – Rugby Football Union

SU – Sport Unites

JRF – Jason Roberts Foundation

RC – Rugby Club(s)





Summary



“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)



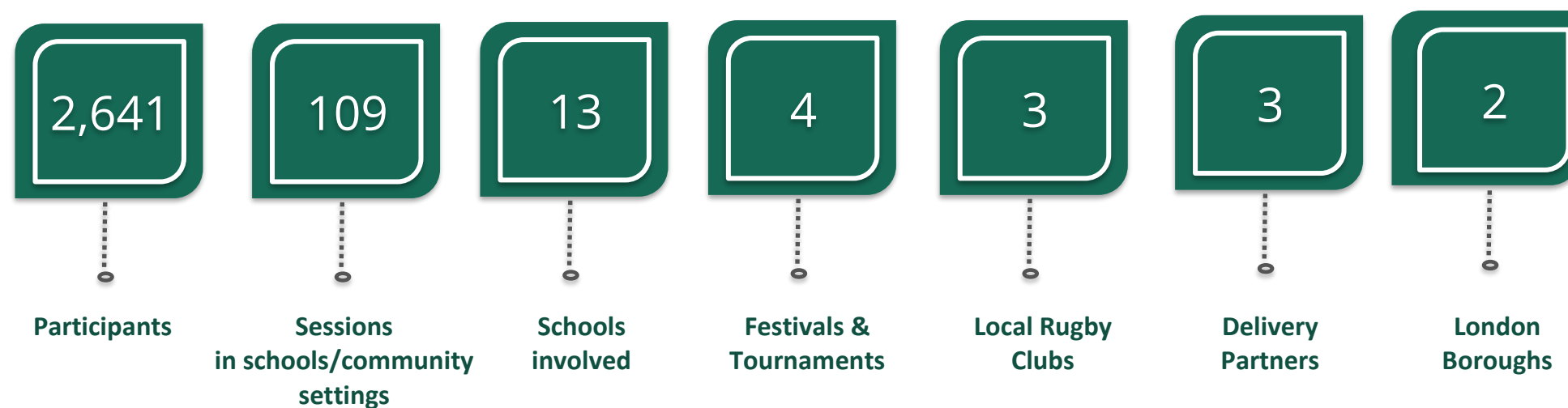
Rugby Football Union (RFU) and the Mayor of London launched London EmpowerHER in February 2024, as part of their commitment to create a healthier, safer and more inclusive future for women and girls in Redbridge and Brent. The pilot ran for one year and involved non-contact rugby activities as a way of promoting physical fitness, developing leadership skills and a pathway to better employability. The programme also aligned with RFU’s strategy to grow female participation by 100,000 by end of 2027, and London’s campaign to combat violence against women and girls, by spreading awareness and education. The timing of this pilot in 2024-25 was seen as key to the success of this project. With England hosting the Rugby World Cup 2025 and with Twickenham (Allianz Stadium) hosting the semi-finals and final games, the partners were seeking to grow the women and girl’s game throughout London. The pilot focused effort and resources in two London boroughs offered a great opportunity to show what this means in practice – for individuals, local communities and women and girls in particular.

Key impacts

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
- The **majority of participants had never played rugby before**: Saracens Foundation (Redbridge) and Jason Roberts Foundation (Brent) found that 55-60% of participants had never played before; and London Irish Foundation (Brent) that no participants had played before.
- **80% of participants have consistently engaged** in opportunities to play rugby, i.e. on an ongoing basis.

Spotlight on numbers



Outcomes for women and girls

London EmpowerHER is making an **important difference to women and girls** who are taking part, schools, clubs and project partners.

Personal outcomes described by participants include:

- increased self confidence
- feeling an impact on fitness levels
- developing broader life skills and valuing teamwork
- stronger connections and friendships between women and girls
- an enjoyment of the game and a sense of belonging for those who have gone on to play at school and/or register with a club.



Challenges

London EmpowerHER has also encountered various challenges, some of which relate to capacity and practical issues while others are about perceptions of rugby as well as wider barriers to women and girls' participation in sport.

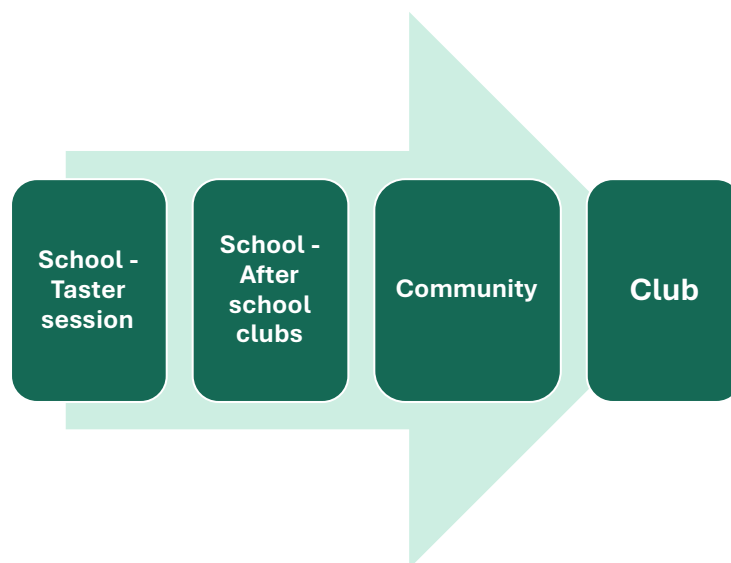
- **Practical issues** relate particularly to playing rugby in school settings including the availability of staff, timetabling issues, the late cancellation of sessions to accommodate other activities and lack of the right kit, including boots.
- A **shortage of spaces to play** (both in schools and 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 in the delivery of activities for local communities
- Little knowledge or experience of rugby, and **some preconceptions** about the sport, in schools as well as among women and girls
- Wider concerns about **barriers to women and girls taking part in sport**, including:
 - **Personal safety**, including when using public transport. Women and girls often prefer the places they go for their activities 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 and young men**, some of whom remain scornful or critical about women and girls' abilities.

Important lessons

London EmpowerHER has highlighted several lessons that relate not only to similar rugby based developments, but also to broader place-based sports initiatives. As a result these lessons should be of interest to a wide variety of audiences. They include:

- **The local context** influences success, particularly a place's rugby history and infrastructure; consider whether the place you're working in is a 'rugby borough/town/community' before deciding on the approach, partners and delivery model outlined below
- **Community organisations can be great partners**, but they often lack capacity. Broadening the base of community partnerships can help with engagement and relationship building with women and girls, and also with building collective capacity when local organisations are struggling. However, building these relationships and the trust that underpin community initiatives **takes time**
- **Adopting flexible partnership models** such as those that have developed through London EmpowerHER, illustrated below, help to overcome challenges and are likely to be more sustainable in the long term. These flexible models contain two key elements:
 - community partners working alongside clubs and schools, with the best placed organisation in the area taking the lead;
 - a pathway comprising a range of diverse opportunities for women and girls to participate, engage, play and progress .

A traditional linear model of engagement



A flexible partnership model



- **The importance of welcoming, inclusive cultures**, meaning some established, specialist organisations, e.g. local rugby clubs, may need support to change.
- **Festivals & tournaments** play an important role, not just for the games, but for the inspiring activities around them
- **Tackling wider, societal barriers** is a key element of sport for development programmes such as London EmpowerHER. Two key themes which ran throughout this project were: how best to support women and girls to continue to be active outside/post school; and the need to engage and educate boys and young men so that women and girls feel welcome, feel safe and are included in all aspects of sport.

Priorities for the future

The RFU and the Mayor of London are working together to build on the evidence of what works and lessons learned throughout the pilot, 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. Messages from this pilot to take forward into the next era of London EmpowerHER include:

- **Identify and involve the right people** – supportive teachers, great coaches and dedicated volunteers
- Engage with **parents/communities** who have no history with rugby to challenge stereotypes and promote benefits
- Support women and girls to make the **transition** from school to club
 - Having a pathway of opportunities
 - Addressing concerns about travel and personal safety
 - Proactively welcoming and working with friendship groups
- **Adopt a flexible partnership model** that reflects the lessons outlined above, including working with **local hubs** in areas with no club
- **Showcase role models** that look like the women and girls you want to involve as they can play a key role in providing inspiration and modelling what's possible.
- **Embed light touch monitoring, evidence generation and distillation** to enable local and shared learning about what works, and build on the encouraging achievements and individual impacts shared in this report.



1. Overview and contexts of London EmpowerHER

1.1 What this report is about

This report shares the evaluation findings and learning from London EmpowerHER, a pilot sports programme which ran from February 2024 to January 2025 with the aim of reaching and engaging more women and girls in non-contact rugby in two London boroughs.

It has been written for funders of sport for development programmes across London and beyond including Rugby Football Union (RFU) and the Greater London Authority (GLA); the range of organisations and clubs delivering sports initiatives, particularly rugby, seeking to engage women and girls from underserved communities; for programmes focused on improving the life chances of women and girls including those involved in London's anti-violence campaigns; and importantly for women and girls and who are interested in and passionate about the game.

It highlights what worked for over 2000 women and girls who engaged in a range of opportunities to learn and play non-contact rugby in a variety of community, school and club settings. It explains what enabled this level of participation and draws attention to some of the barriers to participation so that these might be addressed in the ongoing delivery of London EmpowerHER and broader opportunities for women and girls in rugby.

There are four sections, as follows:

- [Section 1](#) provides the background and context to the London EmpowerHER project, why it happened, where it happened and how it happened.
- [Section 2](#) gives an overview of the evaluation and learning activities that took place between March 2024 and January 2025, and includes the London EmpowerHER Vision and Outcomes Framework used to steer the evaluation.
- [Section 3](#) shares the findings from evaluating progress towards these four outcomes, including important themes, messages and lessons about what works for whom and how this came about.
- [Section 4](#) sets out the conclusions drawn from this pilot evaluation including the insights and learning about what has helped delivery partners, women and girls and the challenges that still need to be addressed.

1.2 Background to London EmpowerHER

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 and girls' game, setting an ambitious target of reaching 100,000 registered female players by 2027.

The London EmpowerHER project was designed to contribute towards this goal, building on the capital's status as one of the World Cup's host cities. It aimed to engage women and girls aged 11-18 years from underserved communities in non-contact rugby in community venues, including schools, led by local third sector organisations in partnership with rugby clubs and Foundations.

The project therefore also piloted a partnership delivery model that brought together rugby clubs, community partners and schools. The aspiration was to build a pathway that enables women and girls to move easily from taster sessions, to after school or weekend sessions, to finally playing as part of a team at a local club.

This partnership was reflected at a regional and national level; RFU as the national governing body for rugby in England responsible for the promotion of the sport and the development of players and officials, worked with the GLA's Sport Team to design a programme that capitalised on the timing of the World Cup whilst contributing to the Mayor's vision for London to be the most socially integrated, active city and undisputed sporting capital of the world, based on the belief that sport has the power to bring people together and improve lives.

London EmpowerHER therefore aimed to create a healthier, safer and more inclusive future for women and girls in two London Boroughs, Redbridge and Brent. These Boroughs were selected following a review of local demographic data against key strategic outcomes of both the GLA and RFU. The London EmpowerHER fund allowed delivery organisations to deliver non-contact rugby and leadership activities to women and girls in Years 7 to 11, with sessions designed to introduce women and girls to non-contact rugby as a route into playing rugby, promoting physical fitness while also helping them to increase their confidence and develop skills that would be important to them later in life. London EmpowerHER was also committed to supporting London's campaign to combat violence against women and girls by spreading awareness and education, and was underpinned by the rugby values of Teamwork, Respect, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship.

The project was launched by Red Roses legend Maggie Alphonsi at Eton Manor Rugby Club in February 2024, followed by a training session for over 40 women and girls from Redbridge and Brent, kick starting the project as it meant to continue – with women and girls having the opportunity to try, learn and play rugby.

The GLA's Sport Team worked with the RFU to select the delivery partners for each of the two boroughs, as follows:

In Redbridge: Saracens 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 Section 3, even if the pathway looked slightly different in each borough.

The local 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, four festivals / tournaments were held at community rugby clubs, and regular community based sessions also took place, to broaden the project's reach, offer progression from school sessions and strengthen the link with local clubs. The events typically included not only opportunities to play, but also sessions with inspiring speakers including professional women rugby players.





2. Evaluating & Learning About What Works

2.1 About this section

London EmpowerHER initially ran as a pilot project in two Boroughs, so the design for evaluating the process and impact of this period was based on methods that emphasise learning and building a shared understanding of change, including what enables changes to happen, for whom and how. This section explains this approach and the key stages involved.

2.2 Evaluation Approach

A mixed methods, five stage process and early impact evaluation was designed to run alongside the pilot project to find the answers to the following questions:



Evaluation questions

- How many women and girls are taking part (in the two boroughs), and who are they?
- What are their perceptions before and after being involved in the project?
- What is it that women and girls like about rugby? What are the common themes or messages that are important to highlight and design into future delivery?
- What proportion of participants go on to join a local rugby club and become regular players?
- What is the impact of the leadership training element on the aspirations and employability of the women and girls who take part?
- To what extent will the project contribute towards increased awareness of violence against women and girls?
- What is working well and what isn't working so well (that can inform ongoing developments and delivery of the project)?

A key part of the approach taken was a focus on not just what happened and worked well (and what didn't work so well), but also how and why those things came about. This approach to learning is important for sustaining what works and addressing what doesn't work to enable ongoing

developments and delivery to continue. Importantly, as London EmpowerHER is part of a wider sport for development programme, [Sport Unites](#), there was a clear intention to use the evidence generated and shared through this project to contribute to the building evidence base around Sport Unites, and vice versa.

The five stages of evaluation and learning activity are summarised below.

Stages 1 & 2, Getting started and coproducing an evidence and outcomes framework for London EmpowerHER (Spring 2024)

This initial stage included relationship building and mapping the local contexts of the work, including the picture of grant management and monitoring data (such as KPIs, participation numbers/rates, demographic breakdown of participants etc) that London EmpowerHER delivery partners and the GLA aimed to collect, when, from whom and how – including how this would be collated and shared with NDTi’s evaluation and learning team.

An important first step during this stage was holding two, linked Vision and Outcomes workshops with funding and delivery partners, to agree what success looked like for the project, building on the evaluation questions above. The Vision and Outcomes Framework that was co-designed as a result of these discussions is summarised below, with the detailed evidence framework that underpins these headlines provided in Appendix 1.



Stages 3 & 4, Evidence generation and collection (June 2024-January 2025)

This stage included:

- Reviewing and analysing background information and monitoring data held by funding and delivery partners on a rolling basis.
- Fieldwork in each borough, to capture the direct experiences of participants and delivery organisations, through directly observing sessions alongside a small number of structured conversations, interviews and focus groups. These included:
 - Conversations with partners in Redbridge and Brent on how best to build a rounded picture of their plans, activity and progress towards the four London EmpowerHER outcomes
 - Observation visits to Woodford Rugby Club to observe and engage with participants in a tournament involving 9 different schools (Redbridge); and Alperton Community School to observe school based sessions delivered by Jason Roberts Foundation (Brent); and observing women and girls involved in interviews coordinated by the GLA Sport Team to explore what makes women and girls feel safe, as part of the broader aims around combating violence towards girls and women
 - Interviews with local and national partners and stakeholders involved in the design and delivery of the project
 - A semi-structured reflection and learning session with RFU and GLA leads
- Drawing together all the emerging evidence generated through the previous stages into a slide-set interim report in December 2024.

Stage 5, Final synthesis and reporting (February 2025)

- Continuing to update evidence outlined above, to ensure that this final report reflects the most up to date and detailed information available.
- Sharing headline findings and emerging lessons in a Sounding Board workshop with funding and delivery partners, to sense check and develop possible ways forward based on this evidence
- Producing a final report and a summary Spotlight report including infographics, stories and vignettes to illustrate the findings, which can be widely shared with those involved, current and future funders.





3. What are we learning about progress towards London EmpowerHER outcomes?

3.1 About this section

This section focuses on the four outcome areas which form the substance of the Vision and Outcomes Framework shared in Section 2. It brings together the analysis of findings from all data sources and stages of evaluation and learning activity which were examined in relation to the signs of change identified as being key indicators of progress towards these outcomes. It was always recognised that the timescales involved in the project and this evaluation would generate learning about “progress towards outcomes” rather than evidencing impact over time. Ongoing monitoring, evidence generation and distillation to enable local and shared learning will be important for embedding what works and building on the encouraging achievements and individual impacts shared in this section.

3.2. Progress towards London EmpowerHER outcomes



Outcome 1

More women and girls have better lives through taking up, and loving, the many opportunities that rugby offers.

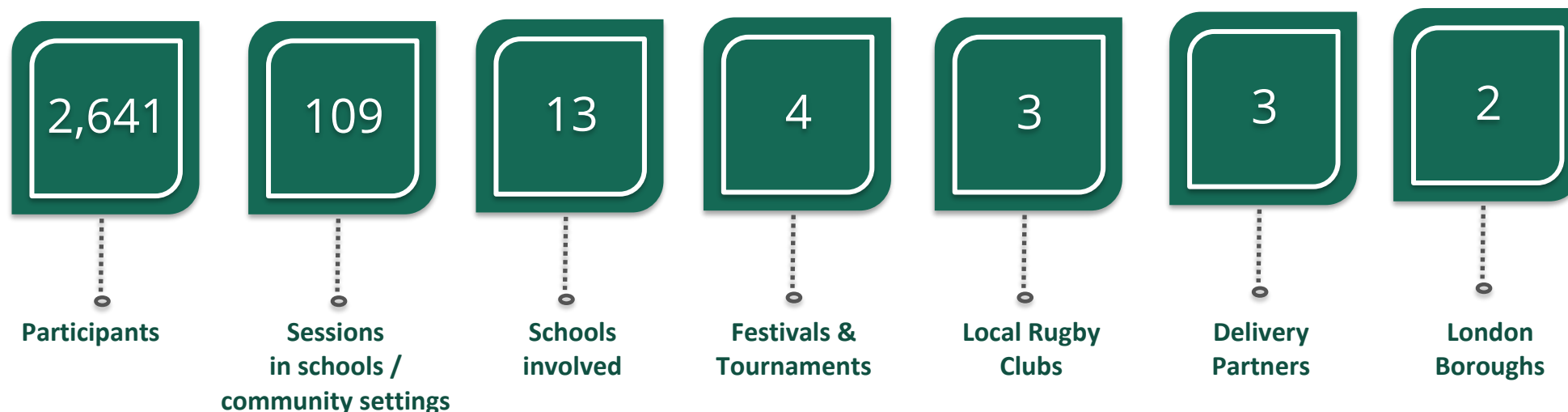


“Seeing girls loving the sport is amazing, it keeps us going.”



Over the active pilot period (June 2024-January 2025), a total of 2,641 women and girls have engaged and are participating in non-contact rugby across the two boroughs. These numbers are impressive and reflect a mix of women and girls who have been introduced to the sport, taken part in taster sessions and festivals as well as those participating in school and club based sessions on a regular basis. The following infographic places this total in the context of the different aspects of project delivery across Redbridge and Brent.

Spotlight on pilot numbers



In addition to these quantifiable aspects of London EmpowerHER's achievements, there are other benefits and outcomes that are evident from feedback from project delivery partners, schools, local rugby clubs and most importantly women and girls participating i.e. who make up these numbers. The main outcomes identified from these sources include:

- Those engaging and participating in the opportunities provided through the project have really **enjoyed learning about rugby and feeling part of the growing community** the sport offers:

"I get to be me, it's just brilliant. Running, being muddy, being dirty, running hard. I love it."

(Participant at Woodford RC tournament, Redbridge)

- There is evidence that women and girls really enjoy playing rugby, and they emphasise feeling **more confident, fitter and valuing teamwork** in particular:

"It makes me feel good, physically and mentally. Gives me confidence, I'm learning skills, I love the teamwork."

(Participant at Alperton community school, Brent)

“I just take challenges on. I wouldn't be negative or put myself down.” (Participant from Brent)

“If you don't set goals you can get out of hand!” (Participant from Brent)

- Rugby is helping to **build connections and friendships** between women and girls, and being able to participate with friends and as part of an established group was repeatedly raised as an important motivator for participants:

“They [the non-contact rugby sessions] bring girls and women together, for comfort and to enjoy rugby together.”

(Participant involved in GLA/RFU video)

“With friends there you can trust them when you aren't sure, they guide you along the way.....sticking up for each other....its empowering.” (Participant involved in GLA/RFU video)

- Delivery partners have commented that the very apparent enjoyment of women and girls is **motivating and inspiring for them** too:

“(We're very) aware of what sport can do in bringing people together, personally as well as professionally. If we are able to do this for young people then it's all worthwhile.” (Saracens lead)

- **Festivals & tournaments** play an important role in introducing the game to and engaging women and girls to try the sport, but they also provide an important opportunity to build inspiring activities around them:

“Girls came back with trophies, stories – they were talking about it for days.” (School lead)

Four festivals / tournaments were held at community rugby clubs between July and December 2024, which have helped to strengthen the link between Foundations, schools and local clubs. These proved popular and successful, and there are plans to repeat these on an ongoing basis in both boroughs. In Redbridge, having taster sessions at either school or in a local community festival sparked an appetite for more playing time including the chance to **“play competitively in proper matches”**.



Outcome 2

Sustainable opportunities to become involved in rugby are available and accessible to women and girls from all London's communities.

London EmpowerHER is playing a positive role in **challenging perceptions** (see also Outcome 4) of rugby as a white, predominantly male, middle-class sport:

“*EmpowerHER has got us into non-traditional communities.*” (RFU London & South East Regional Lead)

It is striking that **70% - 80%** of all participants involved in non contact rugby through London EmpowerHER are from minority ethnic communities, a figure that the delivery partners confirm is the mirror opposite of typical participant profiles which usually reflect 30% of participants from diverse communities. This has been achieved through a combination of targeted engagement (e.g. in specific areas and with schools and community organisations in Redbridge and Brent), building trust and relationships through coaching styles and support, and by providing a range of opportunities and routes for taking part.

In addition, the project has been successful in engaging women and girls who have never played rugby or been exposed to the game. Both Saracens Foundation and Jason Roberts Foundation found that **55-60%** of participants engaged in opportunities they have provided have never played before, and London Irish Foundation reported that **none of the participants** they engaged had played before.





From the Rugby Field to Friendship: A's Rugby Journey

A total of three, girls' rugby festivals were hosted at Woodford Rugby club with the Saracens Foundation, with over 200 total attendances from women and girls across these festivals.

The primary aim of the festivals was to allow girls from a variety of schools to come and see their local club, and experience how welcoming an environment rugby can be. These festivals provided opportunities for young people like, 'A,' to take the steps to make new friends.

As a result of these events and other opportunities provided through London EmpowerHER, Woodford Rugby Club have had **over 15 girls join the club**, or attend open day training sessions across their girls age groups.

In November 2024, Saracens Foundation hosted a tournament at Woodford Rugby Club for girls who participated in Saracen's Make Your Mark Project (the Redbridge name for London EmpowerHER). Over 85 girls from across the borough of Redbridge participated, and had the opportunity to discover their local rugby club, play against other schools, and hear from inspiring women about their journeys through rugby.

On the day, one of the participants 'A', had so much fun, even though she hadn't been part of a sports club for a few years after stopping playing football. 'A' represented her school on the day, scoring several tries that contributed to her school winning their group and being able to lift a trophy presented to them by Saracens Women's player Isla Alejandro and Leicester Tigers Women's player Zainab Alema.

Less than a week later, the Saracens Foundation returned to Woodford Rugby Club to support a training session, and met 'A' again, where they discovered she had joined the U12's team at the club! She had such a good time at the tournament the week before and saw it as an opportunity to come along to the following week's training session where she could meet new friends. According to one of the coaches from Woodford:

"A' arrived tonight at training after her playing on Friday, her dad said she was so keen to come down and give it a try even though it's quite chilly! The other girls have welcomed her with open arms."

The connection built between Woodford Rugby Club and Saracens Foundation is one that as only benefitted the local community with additional support being provided to a community Rugby club to grow their girls' teams.

Despite these successes, **barriers to women and girls' participation** in sport continue to exist. These barriers include:

- **Lack of familiarity** with and family support for rugby
- A shortage of **suitable community venues**, with the right facilities - especially for activities out of school hours
- Woodford has built good relationships with schools. Most clubs **don't have the capacity** to do this.
- Schools getting behind and promoting sessions in schools so girls know they are happening and are being encouraged to give it a go; **teachers often lack the confidence**, and some reportedly lost confidence post-covid, but *'having specialists involved has really increased confidence'* – promote the partnership with Foundations and clubs so teachers know they are not on their own.
- Once schools have been engaged and actively participating in events etc., another key priority in terms of sustainability is the **need to develop their own skills** so that sessions continue beyond those provided by sports Foundations and clubs. Links with the RFU's Rugby School Managers will help in this ongoing development.
- Women and girls often prefer the places they go for their activities/fun to be **within walking distance** – which is difficult when there is no local club
- Women and girls also prefer to take part in opportunities and sessions **with their friends and/or people they already know** including relatives. This characteristic could be harnessed e.g. by encouraging women and girls to attend taster and after school sessions together, rather than on an individual basis.

"My cousin is my inspo, they keep motivating me, but I dunno, I'm a bit scared to go." (Redbridge tournament participant)

The majority of partners and participants are keen to see the achievements and experiences of London EmpowerHER continue and grow; there is a lot of enthusiasm and ideas for the future, but **uncertainty about funding** is clearly an issue. A **sustainable model** that allows women and girls to continue to learn and play outside school, even when there is no local club is seen as one important route for enabling this to happen, for example:

- **Rugby hubs** in communities without an established club.
- Rugby clubs addressing the barriers to engagement and **embracing what works in welcoming and enabling greater participation** from women and girls in their activities.
- **Embedding rugby** by starting at a younger age, for example building on the interest shown to date from girls in years 6, 7 and 8.
- Learning the lessons about **how to make rugby relevant** in places that are not 'rugby boroughs', for example by:
 - Greater use and promotion of role models (e.g. Red Roses, role models reflecting the diversity of women and girls taking up rugby)
 - Supporting and learning from small specialist groups, e.g. Black Girls Ruck, British Asian Women's group, who are aiming to change perceptions in their communities.



Outcome 3

Women and girls are becoming leaders and have influence and a voice through rugby.

“

(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.”

”

In terms of seeing change relating to this outcome, it is important to recognise that it is very early days and the pilot ran for a short period of time (8 months) before evidence was synthesised to inform this report. However, there are some encouraging *signs of change* relating to women and girls' influence and leadership potential. Individual experiences, feedback and data show that:

- Rugby plays an important role in building **confidence and character** which is valued by women and girls as well as being a key aim of the project. Some coaches involved in delivering London EmpowerHER sessions are extremely skilled in developing these skills and behaviours, with one school recognising that their staff have much to learn from community coaches.
- This outcome is absolutely consistent with wider **RFU aspirations**, articulated by one of the regional leads: *‘We’re not just looking to develop a rugby player, we’re looking to develop the person as well.’*
- Women and girls involved in creating campaign videos to raise awareness of violence against women and girls, including their experiences and the impacts of misogyny, were clear about the need to **challenge negative stereotypes about women and girls playing rugby**, particularly those held by their male peers:

“Boys say ‘you’re rubbish, get back in the kitchen’, it’s down-putting. But girls can do whatever they want.”

“I’d say to boys ‘don’t criticise [us], help or encourage us. Boys and girls can do the same things.’ ”

“Sport is for everyone.”

- **Role models** play a key role in modelling what’s possible to women and girls, as one of the tournaments in Redbridge illustrated by inviting two professional rugby players along to talk to the women and girls involved. Each of the professional players shared their own story of starting out and “getting hooked on rugby” and encouraged the young people to believe in themselves and each other:

“My journey could be your journey!”

“My message to you today is, Be bold, be brave, be yourself. All of you guys are bulldozers!”

- The use of the [Skills Builder Framework](#) will hopefully provide more detailed **learning about which broader life skills are developing and how**. As at December 2024, 40 women and girls were registered on Skills Builder which will provide insights as well as evidence of change over time for these individuals. As part of the training provided to the London EmpowerHER delivery organisations, rugby sessions have been aligned to the essential skills set out in [Aiming High](#); participants are supported to reflect on how they have developed these during sessions and to track their progress. The women and girls taking part are also supported to use Skills Builder [Benchmark](#) to track their progress in wider contexts, and their schools are given guidance on how the tools and resources can be used to further develop these skills outside rugby sessions.



Outcome 4

Peoples’ positive perceptions of rugby and the difference it can make are helping to build a sense of community around the sport.

Challenging perceptions and stereotypes both about rugby, and about women and girls participating in rugby, have been constant themes throughout this pilot period. There is evidence of growing confidence among women and girls who are participating in London EmpowerHER and of a growing sense of belonging and enjoyment that underpins a sense of community that can help grow the game.

“ I just love it ! Wasn’t into any sport. Didn’t like PE. Then we started rugby. Oh. My. God. I just love it”

A group of women and girls participating in an interschools tournament in Redbridge shared how they had not yet played rugby outside of school sessions but that they were thinking about joining a club. Their friends and PE teacher were encouraging them join a club. They shared that they were initially scared at the thought of going to rugby outside of school, and even playing rugby in school as they thought they would get hurt ‘because it’s rough’. Those that are now actively regularly playing said ‘it’s not an issue now’. One of these girls said ‘it makes me feel good, physically and mentally. Gives me confidence, I’m learning skills, I love the teamwork’.

Place based approaches to sport, like London EmpowerHER, **depend on trusted partners** for successful engagement and sustained delivery. Those involved in this pilot project have found that **community organisations can be great partners**, as they:

- can reach into key communities,
- are valued by women and girls
- are resourceful
- are trusted by the local community,
- share a focus on achieving wider social outcomes.

However, they also **often lack capacity** to both engage as active partners and to deliver in ways that follow through from initial engagement to ongoing delivery and sustained participation.

As a way of building and spreading community partnerships, some local as well as national **partners are developing links with other community groups**. Woodford Rugby Club, in Redbridge, has invited local Girl Guide groups to experience taster and follow up training sessions on their rugby pitch, as part of getting rugby on people's radar more broadly. Normalising rugby as a sport for women and girls will help to chip away at existing perceptions that rugby isn't for women and girls and open up the different routes into the sport beyond schools and clubs.

Project partners experiences reinforce the knowledge and understanding that building relationships and trust that underpin community initiatives **takes time**, so it's important to factor this into planning and scheduling activities. This is an important feature of place based sport programmes, and one that needs to be continually worked at, refreshed and developed.

There are also benefits to schools in learning from the way that their community partners work, as one of the participants' schools shared during an observation visit in Brent:

"Initially I didn't realise the benefit we were going to get."

Some of the teachers attending from schools involved in an inter-schools tournament in Redbridge were also clear about the benefits to girls from their school, and to themselves:

"We're both PE teachers but we don't have rugby lessons or sessions at school. I did try to introduce rugby as I love it, but I don't know how to teach it, I don't know about non contact rugby. This is a great opportunity for these girls."

Community partners are aware of these benefits and the mutual advantage of partnering with schools:

"This is a great project, well resourced, great example of build it and they will come. We've got the pitches, the facilities at Woodford, not all schools have these." (Redbridge Coach)



4. Lessons about what works and priorities for the future

4.1 About this section

This section draws together the headline findings from the previous sections, before going on to highlight what these might mean for the future of EmpowerHER and the priorities for the next phase.

4.2 Key Impacts

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

- **2,641** women and girls are participating
- Between **70% and 80% of** participants are from minority ethnic communities
- At Saracens and Jason Roberts Foundation **55-60% of participants have never played before** and at London Irish Foundation, **no participants have 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



4.3 What have been the challenges?

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 described below:

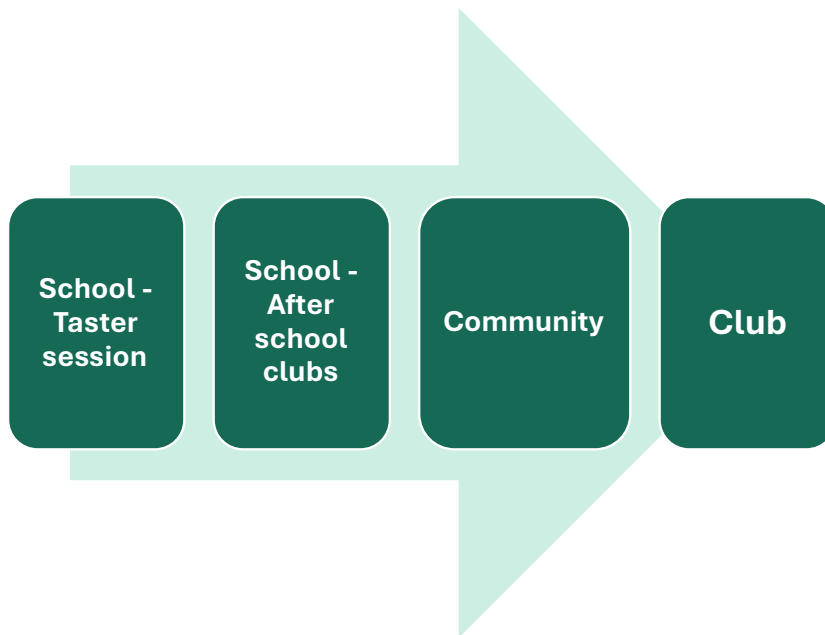
- **Practical issues** relating particularly to playing rugby in school settings, such as in the example above. These include the availability of staff, timetabling issues, the late cancellation of sessions to accommodate Christmas activities and lack of the right kit, including boots.
- A **shortage 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 in the delivery of activities for local communities
- Little knowledge or experience of rugby, and **some preconceptions** about the sport (in schools as well as among women and girls).
- Wider concerns about the **barriers to women and girls taking part in sport**, including:
 - **Personal safety**, including when using public transport – women and 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 and young men**, some of whom remain scornful or critical about women and girls' abilities.

4.4 What are the key lessons?

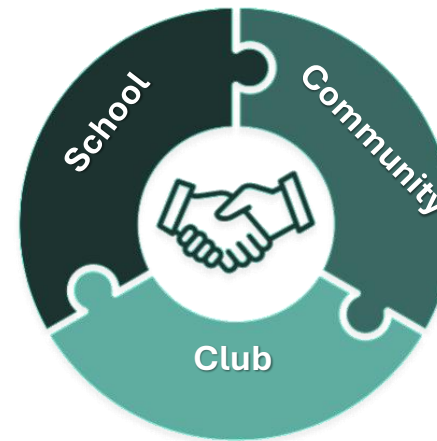
London EmpowerHER has highlighted several lessons that relate not only to similar rugby based developments but also to wider place-based sports initiatives, including:

- **The local context** influences success, particularly a place's rugby history and infrastructure; consider whether each place is a 'rugby borough/town/community'?
- **Community organisations can be great partners**, but they often lack capacity, and building the relationships and trust that underpin community initiatives **takes time**
- **Adopt flexible partnership models** such as those that have developed through London EmpowerHER, illustrated below, which contain two key elements:
 - community partners working alongside clubs and schools, with the best placed organisation in the area taking the lead;
 - a pathway comprising a range of diverse opportunities for women and girls to participate, engage, play and progress .

A traditional linear model of engagement



A flexible partnership model



- **Develop inclusive cultures, taking account of current and historical contexts of local rugby 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 them
- **Framing non contact rugby as a new, exciting game**, distinct from full contact rugby, in order to initially engage participants
- **Tackling wider, societal barriers** is key; two key themes which ran throughout the project were: how best to support women and girls to continue to be active outside/post school; and the need to engage and educate boys and young men so that women and girls feel welcome, feel safe and are included in all aspects of the sport.

4.5 What next?

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.



Messages from this pilot to take forward into the next era of London EmpowerHER include:

- **Involve the right people** – supportive teachers, great coaches and dedicated volunteers
- Engage with **parents/communities** who have no history with rugby to challenge stereotypes and promote benefits
- Support women and girls to make the **transition** from school to club
 - Having a pathway of opportunities
 - Addressing concerns about travel and personal safety
 - Proactively welcoming and working with friendship groups
- **Adopt a flexible partnership model** that reflect the lessons outlined above, including developing and/or working with **local hubs** in areas with no club
- **Showcase role models** that look like the women and girls you want to involve as they can play a key role in providing inspiration and modelling what's possible.
- **Embed light touch monitoring, evidence generation and distillation** to enable local and shared learning about what works, and build on the encouraging achievements and individual impacts shared in this report.



Appendix 1. Vision and Outcomes Framework



EmpowerHER Outcomes & Evidence

June 2024



Vision: Rugby is changing the lives of young women and girls in London and is making a positive contribution to a strong sense of community.

New outcomes (changes to get closer to the vision):	Themes and headlines from our discussion	Signs of change: How will we know we are being successful, that each of these changes is happening, and working well?	Sources of evidence: What information / data will tell us if these things are happening? What needs to be collected, when, by whom? Do you have it or do we need to generate it?
1. More young women and girls have better lives through taking up, and loving, the many opportunities that rugby offers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rugby and activity are a lifelong habit• Young women and girls (and others?) have broader perceptions of rugby and of the many ways to be involved• More young women and girls are playing rugby in clubs, as well as volunteering & championing rugby.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased numbers involved in the club scene• As a result more school teams and clubs forming• More female coaches, leaders & volunteers• Other opportunities are being offered (eg thru partners like Brentford FC)• Greater visibility of females in rugby	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Numbers of participants• Number of teams in different leagues• Number of coaches coming through programmes• Visibility in league games• Sponsorship• Competitiveness?• Participant profile within rugby (changing over time at individual and macro levels)• Case studies• Stories including initial responses re experiences

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2. Sustainable opportunities to become involved in rugby are available and accessible to young women and girls from all London's communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The barriers to getting young women and girls involved and active have been removed • The work is sustainable over the long term • Every borough in London has a similar programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More opportunities to play non-contact Rugby (current – to end of project) • The right offers are in place including timing /location etc • More females knowing and understanding the offers • Things continuing over time • T1 rugby regular sport in schools • Wider demographic accessing Rugby 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More delivery and sessions i.e. number of sessions by borough including by days/times. • Number of participants • Monitoring of groups / individuals attending and participating (i.e. demographic profile/breakdown). • Compare baseline (current situation) to changes over time • School data re provision
3. Young women and girls are becoming leaders and have influence and a voice through rugby.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The programme is producing future leaders • Participants are using the World Cup as a platform for sharing their experience of the positive impact of rugby 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Females' perceptions changing as a result of being involved in rugby • More females involved, and developing skills eg teamwork, leadership • Changing perceptions in schools about rugby being for females/everyone in any community (it's a safe sport) • Impact of the World Cup can be seen via more females being involved & taking up leadership roles (linked to OC 1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testimonials, case studies, stories • More rugby including T1 rugby in schools and local communities • Look at participation rates, volunteer numbers/profile

New outcomes (changes to get closer to the vision):	Themes and headlines from our discussion	Signs of change: How will we know we are being successful, that each of these changes is happening, and working well?	Sources of evidence: What information / data will tell us if these things are happening? What needs to be collected, when, by whom? Do you have it or do we need to generate it?
4. Peoples' positive perceptions of rugby and the difference it can make are helping to build a sense of community around the sport.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community wide cultural change and change of perception of rugby as a sport (non contact T1) are taking place. • Diverse communities see rugby as a sport for them - including for young women and girls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural shift is taking place • Wider demographic/profile participating and running opportunities, leading & delivering sessions. • Rugby Clubs engaging with communities, and communities using rugby club facilities – on their radar. • Rugby more visible and in place in community events/festivals – stronger positioning of rugby. • Rugby at forefront, a go-to sport for engagement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story telling – journey / case studies • Demographic profile of people (females) accessing and registered at clubs. • More coverage – greater understanding of sport and benefits



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