



**South Sydney Rabbitohs District
Rugby League Football Club Limited**

ABN 28 002 487 390
Locked Bag 1, Redfern, NSW, 2016

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The Juniors

Mr David Trodden
Chief Executive Officer
New South Wales Rugby League

By Email: dtrodden@nswrl.com.au

15 July 2020

Rugby League Boundaries and Competitions

Dear David,

Thank you for your letter of 10 June 2020 and the opportunity to provide our views on a potential review of boundaries and competition structures across New South Wales. On behalf of the South Sydney Rabbitohs District Rugby League Club and South Sydney District Junior Rugby League, we wanted to write and offer a joint view on this review. Like your organisation we are also keen to support any improvement in the delivery of Rugby League in metropolitan Sydney and regional New South Wales, particularly where there can be a more efficient and productive use of the game's investment in "grassroots".

Clearly we share your concerns over the application in recent years of the significant amount invested by the NRL in "Development" or "Grassroots". Across 2017, 2018 and 2019, over \$100million was spent by the NRL on "Development" or "Grassroots". However, participation numbers are at best stagnant and junior Rugby League leagues/clubs would say they have seen minimal results from, or evidence of, this investment. The staff structure and programs that have been delivered as part of this investment have largely remained unchanged, and burdened by bureaucracy. There has been no coherent strategy. The process of decentralising the responsibility for growing participation needs to be accelerated, with the NRL acting as commissioning agent – paying by results, fostering innovation and with an absolute focus on the experience of the volunteer/participant. Organisations should be funded and accountable for growing the number of people actively playing or volunteering in Rugby League – not ticking boxes for an ever-increasing bureaucracy.

1. What is the optimum size and structure for competitions in metropolitan Sydney?

Structure

Mini and Mod League:

We suggest offering a competitive and a non-competitive stream in these age groups. This allows parents, volunteers and players to have choice. It also suits all stages of the participation spectrum - from first timers to the more competent competitive aspirational player – most importantly without changing the fabric of the game.



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Under 13s to Under 20s - Sydney wide - two tiered:

Aspirational Competitions - for players aspiring to play at their highest level possible. This should reduce restrictions on clearances to allow districts to place teams in these competitions, with districts allocated positions for teams based on the junior population base. For example, Souths could submit three teams into a 13s (3 clubs) and Penrith may have 5, Canterbury 4, Manly 2, etc. This would bring the best players with a desire to reach the highest level together in one competition. No restrictions on travel are needed in this competition.

Participation Competitions - for players playing for fun and participation, but still want to play in a competition. By removing all the aspirational elite players, this competition becomes more even across the Clubs and allows for a better experience. Transfer rules are more stringent to avoid stacking teams in these competitions.

Impact of Pathways on Participation.

Harold Matthews - as previously stated, the current format of Harold Matthews is an impediment to growing participation. If this competition becomes a one weekend Round Robin after the junior league season for players from the district only, this would support the retention of players in junior leagues.

Open Age - Ron Massey Cup and Sydney Shield - we believe that the current format of the Ron Massey Cup and Sydney Shield Competitions have caused a dilution in the strength of A Grade Competitions and placed inflationary pressure on player wages in the NSWRL Major Competitions, without any benefit to player development. Both the junior and senior clubs have consistently been put under financial pressure to recruit/retain players into our A Grade, Jersey Flegg and/or Canterbury Cup programs due to player fees offered in Ron Massey or Sydney Shield. These competitions take away players from junior leagues in Open Age competitions, weakening the standard, decreasing numbers and reducing the capacity for those players to be volunteers at their club. Amending the format of the Ron Massey Cup and Sydney Shield Competitions would increase participation numbers, and boost the strength and quality of players and coaches in district A Grade Competitions. We would suggest the Ron Massey Cup and Sydney Shield Competitions are converted to a knock out tournaments, played between the winners/runners up/finalists of the local Sydney A Grade Competitions, at the conclusion of those A Grade seasons.

2. How do we best balance issues of geography (teams not having to travel too far), numerical size of competitions and competitive balance to achieve 1 above?

Aspirational Competitions - travel is a necessary evil to play against the best teams in competitions that are competitive.

Participation Competitions - place teams into areas of proximity to reduce travel burdens for those that just want to play for fun.



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3. Do we establish a minimum numeric size for a competition in metropolitan Sydney and if so, what is the size (players and clubs)?

We would suggest in all junior leagues, the preferred aim would be for 8 teams per competition to allow a 14 round home and away competition. This will obviously not always be the case, but is a good base to work from.

4. Do we establish a maximum travelling distance for a competition in metropolitan Sydney and if so, what is the distance?

We do not consider that a maximum time is necessary, however the goal should be to reduce travel time for participation competitions. A maximum travel time is unnecessary for aspirational competitions, as participants will be more attracted by the quality nature of the matches and less bothered by travel.

5. Confirmation of the appropriateness of the governance structures

We would support any initiative that improves accountability for the substantial investment in “Development” or “Grassroots”. Clearly, something is deeply wrong with the status quo when the NRL Club reads in the shareholders annual report that \$100million has been invested in “Development” or “Grassroots” over a three-year period; however its junior league partner, who should benefit most from this investment, derives minimal results from or has little evidence of this funding. That position is both unconscionable and unsustainable.

6. Is any amendment required to the junior leagues in metropolitan Sydney?

No – the focus should be ensuring that the investment into “Development” or “Grassroots” by the NRL and NSWRL is actually growing the number of people actively playing or volunteering in Rugby League, and improving the experience of the volunteer/participant.

7. What is the optimum alignment between junior leagues and NRL clubs?

We believe that the Rabbitohs and Souths Juniors have established an alignment that enables both organisations to benefit significantly from each other. For example:

- Coaching - expertise feeds back to Junior League through pathway and development programs, and junior league coaching information sessions.
- Players - Junior league clubs get exposure to NRL players with club visits and attendances at presentation days, grand final days, etc.
- Junior League players - provided for events when required i.e. half time footy and march pasts, etc and the conduct of junior clinic initiatives to grow participation.
- Leveraging the partners of both organisations for better financial and commercial outcomes.
- The establishment of a full performance pathway in the “red and green”.
- The Rabbitohs will be based at Souths Juniors for at least two years whilst the Community and High-Performance Centre at Heffron Park is completed.



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Clearly both the junior leagues and NRL clubs have much to gain from a strong alignment. However each junior league and NRL club will have differing strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities that make it hard to mandate or dictate an optimum model that suits all. However, where there is a genuine spirit of partnership, good communication and shared objectives; the stronger alignment can be of enormous value to both organisations.

Importantly, both our organisations are committed to supporting the NSWRL create an improved operating environment for junior leagues/clubs. Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this project. As always, we are available to discuss any item above with you further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Blake Solly'.

Blake Solly
Chief Executive Officer

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Luke Curry'.

Luke Curry
Chief Executive Officer