WRU CONSULTATION IN FOCUS

Part 1: Pathways, competitions and academies

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About the 'In focus' Series

On the 1st of September, the WRU launched its consultation into the future of elite rugby in Wales and started a month-long conversation giving supporters, players at all levels, rugby volunteers, clubs and communities their chance to help shape the next chapter of the game.

Throughout this period, our 'In focus' series will take a closer look at specific elements of the consultation and provide a more detailed look at key elements of the WRU consultation document and help provide further clarity on why we feel that change is needed.

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Introduction..

This week we will look at Pathways, competitions and academies.

From first boots to first cap, the Welsh rugby pathway is vital to producing the future internationals that can propel our national teams forward for success.

In Wales we have a proud tradition of players coming through the pathway and going on to receive full honours, with our 'golden generations' proof of that success.

Over the past 10 years, it has become increasingly clear that the traditional pathways which once served us well are no longer delivering what Welsh rugby needs. Despite steps taken over the past three years, an aligned and integrated pathway that optimises development and conversion of talent to elite rugby has proved continually difficult. As such, many across the game believe the system is not working to its full potential, and that view has been borne out by results on the field. This is not about making small adjustments, but about making a step change in how we develop talent and creating pathways that can genuinely take our players to the very top of the game.

In this 'In focus', our National Lead for Player Development & Pathways, John Alder is joined by our Director of Rugby and Performance, Dave Reddin and our Head of Women's rugby, Belinda Moore, to delve deeper in to the consultation and look at the current challenges faced within the pathways and some of the solutions put forward as part of the consultation.

Where are we right now with...

Pathways, Competitions, and Academies

Player Pathways

- The elite pathway structure to develop national and international-level players is under review but currently lacks integration and cohesion. While men's players funnel through Regional Academies, EPP programmes, district and club competitions and exiles and up to Super Rygbi Cymru (SRC), the women's game has no equivalent senior domestic tier.
- Existing pathways would benefit from being more closely aligned and integrated, with a more effective blending of local and national development across genders and age groups.
- Although the WRU has invested into Men's Regional Academies, the SRC, and women's development recently, this will take time to show results and further investment is needed. In the meantime, there remains a disconnect between grassroots, regionalised talent development, and elite performance pathways.

Competitions

- Super Rygbi Cymru is currently the core semi-professional competition for men and has enjoyed a successful start, but further progress is needed to ensure the SRC continues to act as a finishing school for our emerging talent and a feeder to the professional game .
- The women's game lacks a senior domestic competition equivalent to SRC, limiting structured match exposure and progression below the cross-border Celtic Challenge.
- The age-grade competitive structure features many stakeholders (schools, colleges, universities, community clubs, SRC clubs, Academies, and schools' districts), often with competing goals and philosophies. As such, the competition calendar is congested and, while strong in some areas, often conflicting.

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Academies

- Men's Regional Academies have existed in a fragmented form. Despite now working to the WRU Regional Academy Licence, Academies continue to lack the necessary investment, resourcing, and unified programming across the men's pathway. While considerable progress has been made in unified programming and delivery within the women's pathways, more work is needed to scale this delivery.
- There is no national performance campus bringing together academies, professional clubs, and national teams under one consistent high-performance environment.
- In the men's game, coaching, support services, and performance infrastructure remain under resourced and developed, unevenly distributed across regions, while reach and access form the main areas of need in the women and girl's game

The current pathway is not optimal for developing the quality and quantity of players required for professional and international success and needs a step change if we are to keep pace with the ambitions set out on the One Wales strategy.

At present the pathway presents us with the following challenges:

- Five separate regional academies mean unified programming and allocation of resource are challenging
- Women and Girl's Player Development Centres (PDCs) are not yet geographically complete
- Competition structures do not optimally support age and stage appropriate elite development
- Talent identification is inconsistent and lacks national oversight
- Coaching and support staff development is underinvested
- A lack of appropriate and consistent facility access across Wales for players, both boys and girls, to develop their skills

We feel that these gaps create friction, slow progress, and limit the potential of Welsh rugby.

John Alder, National Lead for Player Development & Pathways, says,

"The opportunities and barriers to continually improving the pathways in Wales are well known at the WRU, and we have made some significant progress over the last couple of years. In the men's game, we have introduced the Regional Academy Licence and Super Rygbi Cymru, as well as the creation of the Emerging Player Programme and efforts to integrate representative district rugby into the pathway.

Our move to professionalise the women's game through the creation of the Celtic Challenge and our Women's Player Development Centres have been a vital part of progress, and whatever the future looks like, we have to continually question and challenge how we can keep driving standards and optimise player development. We need to make our ability to identify and effectively development talent, one of our biggest competitive advantages."

Belinda Moore, Head of Women's rugby, says,

"I want to create clear, supportive pathways for women and girls where they can not only see the opportunity to play for Wales, but actually believe it's within reach. By continuing to invest in and expand our Player Development Centre network, building a strong domestic competition, and ensuring the right coaching and support, we can give every player the chance to progress and fulfil their potential."

What does the consultation document say on...

Building Stronger Pathways, Competitions, and Academies

At the heart of the proposal within the consultation document is a simple ambition, to create the right environment for Welsh players to develop, compete, and succeed at the highest level. That means strengthening the systems that support young talent, investing in and reshaping domestic competitions, and building development programmes and academies that not only enable athletes to excel as rugby players but also cater for players off the field.

Player Pathways

The suggested structure outlined in the proposed optimal system, would see Wales introduce centralised national academies for men and women, supported by a network of local Player Development Centres (PDCs). network of boy's and girl's PDCs and 'up to 9' girls' PDCs (3 hubs plus 6 satellites) will ensure young players across Wales have inclusive and local access to high quality development opportunities feeding into the newly created National Academies.

These centres would ensure that players and communities would have more localised access to high-quality coaching and development programmes that enable them to excel in a weekly training environment. PDCs would be aligned to clubs through Super Rygbi Cymru and the women's domestic league, ensuring all talent is catered for, where talent can progress at different rates, and players have clear and aspirational next steps. The proposed pathway is intended to be clear and coherent from community age-grade rugby, through local centres, into the National Academies, and ultimately into the professional and international game.

Young players won't just be supported on the pitch. The plan would integrate education, wellbeing, welfare, and personal and professional development programmes, ensuring players can build dual careers that balance rugby with personal development. Adopting this approach would help Wales retain and develop its best talent, attract Welsh qualified talent back to Wales, while supporting them as people as well as athletes.

Competitions

Competitions are the testing ground where players turn potential into performance. The consultation sets out plans to strengthen the semi-professional Super Rygbi Cymru (SRC) with more investment in rugby personnel, facilities, and player support. The SRC will serve as a genuine feeder competition to the professional game and a finishing school for our emerging talent.

For the women's game, a new senior domestic competition would sit beneath the Celtic Challenge, providing a vital platform for aspiring players and a stronger connection to the pathway. The women's Player Development Centre network will continue to expand, with more satellite PDCs across the country to widen access to weekly training and talent identification.

Cross-border opportunities, such as the Celtic Challenge and structured age-grade competitions, will continue to give Welsh players the exposure they need to thrive in a high-performance environment.



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Academies

The proposed National Academies for men and women will become the engine rooms of elite rugby in Wales. Each will bring together the best young players, coaches, and support staff in a high-performance environment aligned with personal and professional development and opportunities.

For men, the National Academy will cater for around c.70-80 full-time contracted players aged 18–23, with additional part-time provision for younger players. For women, the national academy will support 20–25 contracted players.

Beyond the players, the National Academies will also act as hubs for developing the next generation of coaches, analysts, and performance staff, ensuring Wales builds a sustainable pipeline of both playing, coaching, and sport science and medicine talent.

John Alder, National Lead for Player Development & Pathways, says,

"Standing back and taking a full view of the pathways, we currently have an opportunity to make a real step change in our development system, removal of conflict, and genuine integration of the pathway around a common shared strategy and plan, so that we produce more and better players.

he proposals set out here aim to remove current challenges to an integrated and optimal pathway for players. For young players having regular access to better quality coaching means their journey through the pathways would get off to the best possible start. That increases the chance of us producing world class talent and that talent competing at the highest level of professional club rugby, and ultimately, pulling on the red jersey and winning - which is what this is all about."

Belinda Moore, Head of Women's rugby, says,

"The proposed system gives us the chance to put those pathways into practice, with a National Academy, a stronger domestic competition, and wider access to development centres across Wales. It's about creating the right foundations so more women and girls can see a future in rugby, stay in the game, and drive the growth of Welsh rugby for generations to come."

How would this connect to the whole system...

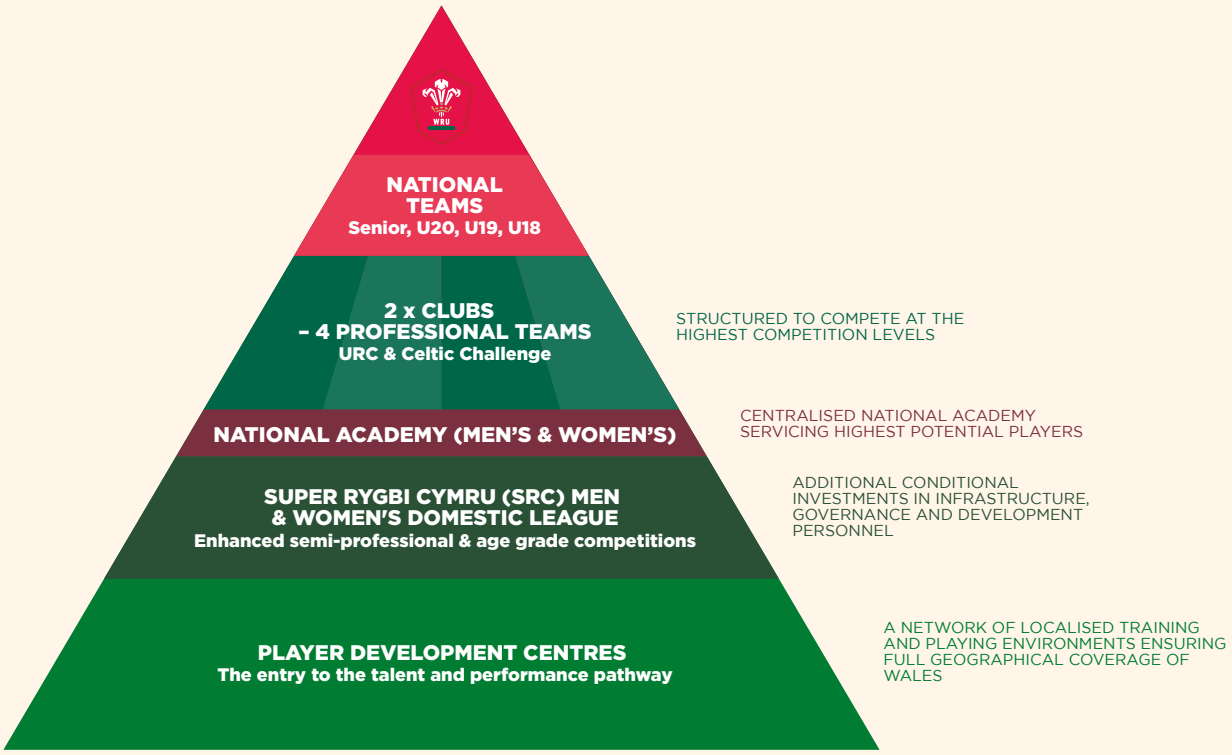
The new pathway model is designed to be seamless and strategic

- PDCs would feed into National Academies as well as men's Super Rygbi Cymru and the women's domestic competition, which feed into professional clubs and national teams
- Competitions would be aligned to development stages and performance goals
- Coaching and support staff would be developed centrally and deployed strategically
- Talent would be tracked and supported through a unified system with shared philosophy and standards
- Educational partnerships would ensure dual career pathways for players
- A new pathway way model would also ensure greater alignment with the community game, helping to serve the growth of the community game and bringing people closer together in the rugby community

This is not just a pipeline. It is a performance ladder – built to elevate Welsh rugby.

Dave Reddin, Director of Rugby and Performance, adds,

"The idea of just putting our focus on the top end of the game and elite clubs is in my opinion a flawed strategy. We simply can't keep looking at short term solutions and expect it to solve our long-term problems. But I do believe that Wales has a rich seam of rugby talent, and by investing in our future with pathways, competitions, and coaching, we can give our players the best environment to develop and turn that potential into a real competitive advantage that will pay for itself with success on the field and get Wales back to winning ways."



What happens next

The proposed plan for the future on Pathways, Competitions, and National Academies is just one part of a 'proposed optimal system' that is being discussed as part of a national conversation on the future of elite rugby in Wales.

The consultation and public engagement survey are running throughout September 2025, with the feedback gathered being used to inform a recommendation to go to the WRU Board in October.

Outside of the consultation, the WRU is continuing to engage with clubs, schools, colleges, coaches and development staff to help shape the future of the pathway. With the 2025/26 Super Rygbi Cymru season underway and the Celtic Challenge first round due to start in December, the team at the WRU remain committed to identifying new opportunities to improve the pathways to ensure they are operating to their full potential.

How can you get involved...

Have your say on the future of Welsh rugby

The consultation on the future structure of the professional game runs the 1st to the 26th of September. This is your chance to shape the direction of rugby in Wales.

- On the **20 of August**, we released the full proposal, you can read that and watch an interview with Abi Tierney and Dave Reddin on the One Wales strategy website.
- On the **1st of September**, our public survey went live, giving every fan the opportunity to share their views directly with the WRU.
- Engagement sessions with key stakeholders will also take place during the consultation period.

Before completing the survey, we encourage you to read the consultation document, which sets out the challenges and options for the future of Welsh rugby.

Take part today – your voice matters in shaping the future of our game.



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