



# RUGBY FOR ALL STRATEGIC PLAN

Energia in partnership with Leinster Rugby

## About Us

Energia is part of the Energia group energising over 250,000 homes and businesses across Ireland with green electricity and natural gas. Energia first launched in 1999 to business electricity customers and in 2014 Energia entered the residential market in Ireland. Leading the way in sustainable energy, Energia has been the longest serving provider of 100% Renewable Electricity in Ireland.

Supporting charities, community projects and strategic partnerships that drive forward Energia's corporate social responsibility is what makes the organisation a powerhouse for progression. Energia's investments outside of energy are directly to improve the lives of others whether that's through charitable donations, being a voice for change or practical on-the-ground support through volunteering.

Energia is also proud to be the Official Energy Partner of Leinster Rugby.

## Introduction

This document sets out and details the research and planning which Energia have undertaken in addressing a societal and sporting participation gap, whereby people with physical and learning difficulties do not have sufficient opportunities or facilities to get involved in sport, namely in this case, rugby. It details the results of research carried out, the vision and objectives set out for the game and a summary of the planned activity to aid its development in the short to medium term.

As official sponsor of Leinster Rugby, with whom Energia have partnered for the activity, this initiative is focussed on the geographical area of Leinster. Rugby for All is the initiative through which Energia and Leinster Rugby intend to support individuals with physical and learning difficulties.

## Background

Energia have been commercial partners of Leinster Rugby since 2018. As official energy partner of the club, the partnership was designed to assist Energia in reaching communities throughout the province and engaging with consumers through rugby.

Energia set about researching and investigating the landscape for players and volunteers involved in rugby in Leinster that have physical or learning difficulties. Anecdotal evidence to that point had suggested this area of the game was underexposed with low awareness and playing numbers in comparison to the 13.5% of the population that live with physical or learning difficulties (CSO 2022).

In order to understand the landscape of the game, the challenges faced by players, and ultimately create a pathway for growth of the game for players with physical or learning difficulties, Energia undertook a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. The research involved regular dialogue with Leinster Rugby, field research, focus groups and surveys.

The research has provided a baseline understanding for the development of this strategic plan for the promotion and growth of rugby among people with physical or learning difficulties within Leinster.

## Research Methodology

In October 2022, Energia undertook an extensive period of research to develop an understanding of the attitudes and opinions of rugby players in Leinster with physical or learning difficulties as well as the parents and volunteers who are also heavily involved in the game. The aim of the research was to establish the impact of their involvement in playing the game, challenges faced by players and volunteers and what could be done to improve the game while attracting more individuals to get involved.

The research was comprised of four key facets:

1. Fact-finding interviews and correspondence with Leinster Rugby officials including Spirit Officer, Stephen Gore.
2. Field research conducted by Energia and agency partners at a tag and mixed ability rugby blitz held at De La Salle Palmerstown RFC.
3. Focus groups conducted with players and volunteers from several clubs with mixed ability teams.
4. A survey issued to a Leinster Rugby email database and targeted at those involved in mixed ability rugby across the province.

## Key Research Findings

### *Landscape of players and clubs*

According to Leinster Rugby's database on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023, there were 520 players with physical or learning difficulties playing either mixed ability (full contact) rugby or tag rugby which are catered for at 26 clubs across the province.

Matches and particularly blitzes are usually arranged on an ad-hoc basis between clubs, which is the only opportunity the majority of players with physical or learning difficulties have to participate.

### *Attitudes and Opinions*

The focus groups revealed a number of valuable findings including:

- Players enjoy both the social and playing element of rugby, be that tag or mixed ability full-contact rugby.
- There is significant appreciation and affection for the coaches that organise and run training and matches, but the players feel those coaches need more support.
- When asked what would make the game better for them, players primarily referred to a greater number of matches and blitzes.
- When asked how a sponsor might benefit and support them, they referenced meet and greets with players, playing opportunities on major Leinster Rugby matchdays at the RDS or Aviva Stadium. Both of these activities do take place on an ad-hoc basis but are greatly appreciated and would be welcomed further. Supplying of tracksuits and match kits were also mentioned.
- Language and terminology were also discussed with few conclusive words or terms that were universally accepted as politically correct. The emphasis was on putting the person first i.e. ‘player with a disability’ would be preferred to ‘disabled player’. Similarly, language that could be interpreted as patronising was not accepted i.e. ‘special needs’ or ‘handi-capable’.

### *Survey*

The survey was completed by 234 participants across 64 clubs in Leinster. Key findings included:

- The top priority among respondents was to grow the ‘Rugby for All’ community i.e. rugby players and volunteers with physical or learning difficulties.
- Awareness of the ‘Rugby for All’ community and the opportunities for players with physical or learning difficulties to play rugby was at 22%
- The key barrier to growing the ‘Rugby for All’ community was stated as a lack of volunteers/coaches (23%)
- When asked about the perceived level of support this game receives from sponsors or third parties, the average rating was 2.8 out of 5.
- When asked about the role a sponsor could play in developing the ‘Rugby for All’ community, responses centred around the supply of equipment, growth of awareness and training support all received roughly half of votes.

### *Interpretation of Findings*

It became clear from the overall findings that a lack of awareness of playing opportunities for people with physical or learning difficulties was the key issue. There is significant enthusiasm and willingness among existing players and volunteers to grow the game, but additional support is needed in order to do so.

Ultimately, the hopes of the existing 'Rugby for All' community are to grow the game so that anyone with a physical or learning difficulty has the opportunity to get involved, resulting in an increase in players, teams and fixtures.

## Strategic Approach

Based on the research findings, Energia in collaboration with Leinster set out a strategy and key objectives to address the lack of awareness and playing opportunities for players with physical and learning difficulties.

### *Awareness*

In collaboration with Energia's communications agency, Legacy, it was agreed that growing awareness of the game was a key priority for year 1 of the initiative. Having been identified as a key barrier to growing the game, it was agreed that an objective would be to triple the level of media coverage of mixed ability rugby or rugby for people with learning and physical difficulties. Measurement of this growth would be compared with online coverage from the previous year up to May 2023, during which there were 12 media articles published by news outlets. The growth in online media coverage will be supported by print and broadcast media coverage as well as significant social media activity which could not be measured retrospectively for comparison going forward.

### *Participation*

Firstly, a target for the number of players and clubs in Leinster that cater to individuals with physical or learning difficulties was to be established. There are currently 73 registered rugby clubs in Leinster and it was agreed that the priority from the perspective of game development should be to increase the number of players with physical or learning difficulties rather than specifically targeting an increase in the number of clubs that offer playing opportunities for people from that cohort. This approach was agreed to help ensure the longevity of teams and blitzes at clubs that are currently, or will become, active.

The risk of facilitating teams at too many clubs could result in not having enough players to field teams or host blitzes, therefore having teams and clubs being forced to withdraw and cease support for players with physical or learning difficulties in the medium to long-term.

## Vision

Energia and Leinster Rugby agreed to the following long-term goal for the initiative, based on establishment of the current landscape of the game and its potential growth. This will serve as a target to achieve, focussing the activity and promotion around the initiative while signalling Energia's intent to the existing rugby community.

*“Energia’s goal is to help grow participation in the game of rugby among people with physical or learning difficulties to over 1,000 players in 40 clubs in Leinster by 2028.”*

## Year 1 Activity

Energia and its partners have set out a series of activities in year 1 of the initiative to grow awareness and promote participation in line with the vision and objectives detailed above.

Prior to the publication of this strategic plan, Energia partnered with Neurodiversity Ireland to support an Easter camp being run for neurodiverse children, supplying toys and activities as well as arranging for Leinster Rugby’s mascot to visit the camp. Energia have also rolled out promotion of sensory toolkits to rugby clubs in Leinster with the aim of providing items that will make the trip to the clubhouse more enjoyable for those with sensory issues and help them feel more at ease.

Additional activity taking place over the remainder of 2023 includes:

- Media launch with Leinster Rugby players and management to grow awareness of rugby for individuals with physical or learning difficulties as well as Energia’s ambitions outlined in this plan.
- Rugby for All Blitz at Energia Park – inviting players and clubs from around Leinster to get take part, thus providing playing opportunities for players in addition to promoting and celebrating current players involved in the game.
- Energia Work Placement – an internship in Energia’s corporate department will be offered to players from the Rugby for All community.
- Leinster Rugby access – a player from the existing Rugby for All community will experience exclusive access to the senior rugby squad, meeting players, getting involved in training and joining the team on matchday.

## Long-term View

Energia’s partnership with Leinster Rugby currently runs to 2028 and it is intended that this initiative will remain the central activity of their partnership. Planning for year 2 of the initiative is already underway while over-arching objectives shifting from growth of awareness to promotion of participation will underpin its activity through to 2028.

While regular reviews may shift the tactical roll-out of the campaign as appropriate, the ultimate goal for the initiative, outlined in this plan, will remain the focal point for any activity. Energia and its partners are committed to improve rugby playing opportunities for people with physical or learning difficulties in Leinster, and it is intended that this plan will serve that commitment into the future.

## Appendix

### *Programme Partners*

- Leinster Rugby's purpose is to affect and support high quality sustainable rugby environments for all by encouraging, promoting, growing and organising the participation in and playing of rugby in the twelve counties of Leinster. Through Leinster Rugby, Energia are connected to all clubs in Leinster to help provide supports for players with physical and learning difficulties at a grassroots level.
- Legacy Communications - a communications agency that support Energia in the strategy development and activation of their sponsorships.
- B&A Research - an independent research and insight consultancy which conducted focus groups with rugby players, volunteers and parents of those currently involved in mixed ability rugby.
- Neurodiversity Ireland are a community group with a vision to establish Irish communities as leaders in creating neurodiverse-friendly places. Neurodiversity Ireland have aided Energia in gaining a better understanding of what is currently being done to create more inclusive communities.