



Accelerating sustainability in professional sport: Insights from rugby union

Key messages:

- Professional rugby union clubs in South Wales and South West England continue to work on reducing their carbon footprint and enhancing sustainable operations. Knowledge exchange forums provide an opportunity for clubs to share expertise, exchange best practices, and build networks that support collective action.
- Engaging rugby club staff, players, fans, and the local rugby community on climate and sustainability actions can foster a sense of partnership and shared identity. This should be supported by clear messaging on how these actions align with the club's sustainability vision and strategy.
- Leveraging teamwork, commitment, and competitiveness among clubs and their fans can drive positive change. Drawing on the example of 'green clubs' in the English Football League, introducing a formal sustainability accreditation scheme could enable clubs to showcase their achievements and foster greater fan engagement.
- Clubs can collaborate to establish minimum sustainability standards in procurement, energy, and transport. Engaging key partners, such as league governing bodies, is crucial; however, the drive for systemic change can also come from clubs and their communities.



Introduction

This briefing is intended as a resource for professional sport clubs, organisations, sponsors, and key stakeholders wanting to engage fans and enhance the sustainability of sports clubs and events.

Sport has the power to bring people together, create a sense of community, and strengthen cultural identity. The sport sector is increasingly recognised for its potential to address environmental challenges, lead by example and influence others. The momentum for climate and sustainability action in sport has grown through initiatives and networks such as [UNFCCC Sports for Climate Action](#)¹, [Sports for Nature](#), British Association for Sustainable Sport ([BASIS](#)), Global Sustainable Sport ([GSS](#)) Network, and the [Sport Positive Summit](#).

Knowledge exchange forums – groups or meetings where people can share insights, experiences, and information – can encourage further action on sustainability.

What we did

Researchers from [Cardiff University](#), the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations ([CAST](#)), and the sports charity [Pledgeball](#) hosted a knowledge exchange workshop at Ashton Gate Stadium, Bristol (England) in June 2025. The workshop brought together professional rugby union clubs to share strategies for and experiences of reducing carbon emissions and engaging fans in sustainability initiatives. Attendees included representatives of [Cardiff Rugby](#), [Bath Rugby](#), [Ospreys](#), and [Bristol Sport](#), as well as stakeholders from the [University of Loughborough](#) and the [University of Bath](#). Cardiff University shared insights from their collaboration with [Dragons RFC](#) and [Pledgeball](#) on fan engagement. For all clubs, this was the first rugby-specific sustainability workshop they had taken part in.

¹Bristol Bears, Gloucester Rugby, Munster Rugby, Northampton Saints, and World Rugby are signatories of the [UNFCCC Sports for Climate Action](#)

What we learnt

1) Rugby clubs already have strategies for reducing their environmental impact

All clubs have taken positive steps, such as recruiting independent consultancies to measure their annual carbon footprint across different sites and activities or providing club staff with [carbon literacy training](#). Some have set net zero targets, and Bristol Sport and Cardiff Rugby have committed to other sustainability actions, including reducing water use and enhancing biodiversity (see [Project Whitebeam](#) and [RSK - Nature Positive](#)). These actions can generate cost savings for the clubs while supporting their sustainability goals.

All clubs have established, or are in the process of establishing, an internal working group to create a sustainability vision and strategy. Such strategies identify actions the club will take and define how progress will be measured. However, clubs face constraints – including time, funding, and capacity – when developing sustainability initiatives and communications. In some instances, a club's sustainability efforts are driven by a single motivated individual alongside their other responsibilities.

2) Clubs identified clear benefits of knowledge exchange and collaboration

Clubs that participated in our workshop reported facing similar challenges when integrating sustainability into their operations. The opportunity to share positive and negative experiences and learn from other clubs was considered invaluable, particularly within regional and local contexts. Highlighting examples of successful initiatives from other clubs or wider trends in other sports can help secure buy-in from a club's senior leadership team for sustainability actions. Potential areas for achieving impact include forming partnerships with sustainable sponsors or combining purchasing power with other clubs to motivate suppliers to innovate and provide more sustainable goods and services.

A further benefit of knowledge exchange forums is the opportunity to build collaborative networks that can collectively engage key actors and address systemic challenges. For example, workshop participants identified two key barriers to progress in rugby: the lack of minimum sustainability standards and the lack of a formal accreditation system for recognising 'green' achievements. Introducing these measures would require endorsement and leadership from league governing bodies such as [Gallagher PREM Rugby](#) and the [United Rugby Championship](#). Demonstrating broad support among clubs could help advance these discussions.

Similarly, workshop participants highlighted late kick-off times as a barrier to more sustainable rugby, as these often coincide with limited public transport availability. Coordinated engagement of multiple clubs with governing bodies, commercial broadcasters, and public transport providers was considered to be an effective strategy to encourage earlier matches or enhanced public transport services on match days.

3) Clubs see fan participation as key to sustainability initiatives

Clubs are keen to include fans in their sustainability journey through two types of actions: *engaging* fans and *enabling* fan action. Workshop participants emphasised the importance of clear messaging to explain to fans: *what* the club is doing, *why* they are doing it, and *how* it fits with the club's sustainability strategy. This messaging can foster a conversation with fans and encourage their active participation in the club's sustainability journey.

Engaging fans: Workshop participants agreed that rugby fans have low awareness of their club's sustainability actions and initiatives. The clubs use various approaches to raise awareness, including:

- Organising green games or eco-matches which highlight the cumulative positive impact of fans' uptake of sustainable behaviours. These behaviours are reinforced by highly visible motivators such as the club mascot.
- Running communication campaigns focused on specific sustainability objectives, typically targeted at season ticket holders who may be more receptive.
- Engaging current or former players in promoting the club's sustainability initiatives and using this to leverage influence, credibility and trust among fans. Clubs did emphasise that an advocacy role should be voluntary, and players should only take on this role if they are passionate and personally committed to climate and sustainability and want to inspire others.

Enabling fans: Clubs play a crucial role in enabling fans to adopt sustainable behaviours, particularly on match days. They can directly influence behaviour by providing reusable cups, biodegradable packaging, waste separation, and recycling bins. They can offer sustainable choices for fans, such as vegetarian and vegan meal options, bicycle lock-up facilities, and free public transport or enhanced public transport on match days. Two clubs are redeveloping their stadiums, and they view this 'moment of change' as an opportunity to disrupt fans' habitual behaviours, particularly around match-day travel.

Workshop participants proposed two novel strategies for influencing fan behaviour. First, vendors such as Ticketmaster could capture fan postcodes at the point of ticket purchase, and this information could help public transport providers identify demand for additional services on match days. Approximate location data could also be used to provide fans with sustainable travel information (or options) *at the point of purchase*, including the potential carbon emission savings from using public transport compared to a car. This approach is already used on booking platforms such as Trainline and Great Western Railway.

The second suggestion was to leverage the inherent competitiveness between clubs and their fans to drive progress on sustainability. Using the example of ‘[green clubs](#)’ in the English Football League, a formal accreditation scheme could enable clubs to showcase their achievements and successes² and position themselves in relation to rivals for achieving Bronze, Silver or Gold status for meeting environmental standards. This approach could foster motivation, pride and a shared sense of identity, and encourage fans to participate in their club’s sustainability initiatives.

4) Clubs should measure fan engagement and evaluate their sustainability initiatives

It is important for clubs to measure fan engagement to understand which sustainability initiatives and communications work or do not work (and why). Key indicators for measuring progress include supporters’ motivations, levels of awareness and participation in the club’s initiatives, as well as their attitudes towards sustainability and the club’s actions.

Understanding their fan base – who engages, why they engage, and what prevents others from participating – helps clubs identify key drivers and barriers of fan engagement in sustainability initiatives. These insights can then inform the design of future initiatives and communication strategies. For example, Dragons RFC and Pledgeball partnered with [Cardiff University](#) to assess the impact of their [Eco-Dragons Campaign](#) with a focus on fan travel.

Using a survey, they measured changes in fans’ travel behaviour over the season – specifically, awareness and uptake of free bus travel for season ticket holders on match days and the resulting carbon emission reductions. These survey findings are now informing the design of initiatives around active travel (i.e., cycling, walking, and wheeling) to Rodney Parade Stadium on match days.



²The English Football League also has a formal accreditation scheme to measure clubs’ progress in adhering to the EFL [Equality Code of Practice](#) on equality, diversity and inclusion.

Recommendations

What we recommend

Sports clubs and other sports organisations seeking to improve their sustainability initiatives should:

- 1) Establish strong networks:** Strengthen collaboration between clubs by continuing to share best practices and identify opportunities for joint action on systemic challenges. Form an interdepartmental working group within each club, representing all operational areas to develop a sustainability vision, strategy and implementation plan.
- 2) Establish further opportunities for knowledge exchange:** Knowledge exchange forums can provide a valuable space for translating broader guidance into local action and allow clubs to learn from one another. Such forums could focus on a particular sport, local region, performance level (e.g., grassroots or professional), or context (e.g., financial capacity). They could support clubs at all levels in translating sustainability aims and principles into concrete strategies, priority areas, and practical steps.
- 3) Engage fans, staff, and players:** Communicate clearly with fans, staff and players about how their behaviour changes and choices align with the club's sustainability strategy, and highlight the actions being taken by the club to enable those changes. Provide opportunities for fans, staff, and players to contribute to the club's sustainability strategy.
- 4) Harness the identity of sport:** Use the competitiveness and sense of community inherent in rugby to help drive progress. Celebrate successful initiatives and engage fans in the club's sustainability journey to create pride and shared identity.
- 5) Establish clear metrics of success:** Measure progress in fan engagement with the club's sustainability initiatives and communications. Rugby clubs could engage with [Gallagher PREM Rugby](#) and the [United Rugby Championship](#) to introduce minimum sustainability standards and a formal accreditation to recognise and reward 'green' achievements.

Acknowledgements

This research and the knowledge exchange workshop were supported by funding from Cardiff University's [UKRI ESRC Impact Acceleration Accounts](#), the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations ([CAST](#)), and the University of Bath [Institute of Sustainability and Climate Change](#). [Pledgeball](#) also supported the recruitment of workshop participants and contributed to the workshop content.

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Suggested citation:

Wilson, M., Collins, A., King, L., Latter, B., Koenig-Lewis, N., Mockridge, C., & Mole, B. (2025). Accelerating sustainability in professional sport: insights from rugby union. CAST Briefing 42. Available at: <https://cast.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/the-centre-for-climate-change-and-social-transformations-cast-briefing-42-accelerating-sustainability-in-professional-sport-insights-from-rugby-union.pdf>

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CAST is funded by the
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