



## THE NEXT LEVEL

**The women's game has enjoyed exceptional success on and off the field. Clare Connor, the ECB's Director of England Women's Cricket, looks back on a year of change and innovation, and the challenges ahead.**



Immeasurable contribution: Rachael Heyhoe Flint

**Rachael Heyhoe Flint's contribution to women's cricket is immeasurable.** Her passing in January is made even more poignant because she won't be here to see us host the ICC Women's World Cup, a tournament she was instrumental in establishing back in 1973, two years before the men's event.

**Quite simply, the sport wouldn't be in such a healthy position without her energy and dedication at all levels of the game.** She became one of the ECB's first female board members in 2010 and she was still integral to change in the twilight years of her life, in particular with regard to England women's professional contracts. She was still at the centre of really important decisions. She was always there to support, advise and offer good counsel.

**It has been an amazing period of change in the women's game.** England have a new captain in Heather Knight; our first high-profile coach from the men's game, Mark Robinson; and we witnessed the inaugural year of the Kia Super League.

**Heather is going to be an exceptional captain.** To follow Charlotte Edwards, who led the team for ten years to such success was always going to be challenging, but it hasn't seemed difficult for her. She's very well respected for her work ethic and for leading from the front. She's straight talking and very fair. As with any new, young captain she will have much to learn tactically but she is a quick learner and has grown up with cricket all around her.

**In the past two years, the England team's performances have been more scrutinised than ever before.** That's to be embraced because it shows that we're operating in a world where people care enough to have an opinion. That is a new challenge for the players but on the whole they are handling it really well.

**A lot of our language right now is about being 'in the arena' and handling the pressure.** The players have come from an amateur age where they were like a tight-knit family who simply loved the game, into a harsher, more judgemental world. The talent system needs to be supportive and challenging in equal measure to prepare players for that. Mark Robinson is talking to them about being comfortable to be tougher on each other, about giving each other clean feedback and raising that bar of expectation all the time.

**We should be really proud of what we've achieved at the elite end of the game.** We have some unbelievable talent on the International Pathway. We have also attracted some brilliant coaches and science and medical staff who are highly dedicated in supporting the players to be the best they can be - it's a highly motivating environment at the moment.

**Our challenge now is underpinning that talent.** We must invest energy and resource more strategically into participation and growth. We're inspiring lots of girls to play through Chance to Shine, in particular, but we need to pay more attention to the club game.

**Ten years ago there were 90 clubs in the country with women's and girls' sections - now there are more than 700.** But we're seeing lots of churn. Now, since the restructuring of the Participation and Growth team there is rightly going to be much more focus on that. It's a great area of potential, especially with the arrival of the All Stars Cricket programme. It's important that the club game is robust and that women's and girls' sections are really inclusive and welcoming places.