



# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting 29 November 2011

### Committee Room Thirteen

#### **Present**

Greg Mulholland (in the Chair); Lord Hoyle; David Mowat MP; James Clappison MP Lindsay Hoyle MP; Yvonne Fovargue MP; Dave Watts MP; Shaun Woodward MP

#### **In Attendance**

Mark Ramsdale (Secretariat); Ray French CBE (no affiliation), Richard Lewis (RFL), Niel Wood (RFL), Stuart Prior (BARLA), Charles Runcie (no affiliation), Ian Ramsdale (no affiliation), Maurice Oldroyd (no affiliation)

#### **Apologies**

Lord Lofthouse; Lord Addington; Jason McCartney MP; David Gent (RFL); Dan Steel (RFL); Spen Allyson (BARLA); Anton Muszanskyj (no affiliation); Ikram Butt (no affiliation)

#### **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2011 were accepted as an accurate record.

#### **Matters arising**

##### *Wembley statue*

The campaign to decide who should be immortalised in a statue at Wembley Stadium was considered a success. It was aligned to ticket sales and over 10,000 people had submitted names. A criteria will be created and the decision taken on a collegiate basis. First enquiries had been made into commissioning.

The initial suggestion for a statue was made by Lindsay Hoyle and the Group had worked to facilitate. It was noted that Group had been informed of the agreement with Wembley Stadium via the public announcement.

Action: Secretariat to ask Members for their suggestions and submit to the RFL.

Lindsay Hoyle raised the need to have recognition of rugby league players at the National Arboretum. He noted that there is a CV winner in Hull there may be others.

Action: Group to take forward.

#### **Correspondence**

Correspondence had been received outlining the BBC's not using the term union when covering the fifteen-man code.

#### **Media Coverage**

The Group was sending out regular press releases. Members of the Group could send their local media details to the Group Secretariat to be added to the mailing list.

A consequence of this increased activity was the need to measure what coverage had been received.

Action: Secretariat to liaise with RFL to add Group releases to clippings services.

#### **Group Activity Report**

The Chairman and Interim Treasurer hosted the board of the Rugby League International Federation on the morning of Culture, Media and Sport Questions. Officers were invited to pictures with the world cup.

The Chairman was invited on behalf of the Group to attend the International Player of the Year awards ahead of the Four Nations. It was felt this was an excellent showpiece for the international game.



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#### **World cup**

All venues for the Group stages and quarter finals had been published. The semi-finals and final were still to be published.

#### **Daily Telegraph Boycott**

A picketing had taken place at the offices of the Daily Telegraph regarding its coverage of rugby league.

Action: Chairman to write to daily telegraph asking how they perceive the sport and what can be done to deliver improved coverage.

[Secretariat note: Subsequently, it was decided that this invitation should be extended to all editors and is being taken forward.]

#### **Annual Dinner**

The Annual Dinner was scheduled for 31<sup>st</sup> January 2012. Members were to be informed.

The Secretariat was working with the RFL. The cost of tickets for Associate Members and guests would increase to reflect the true cost of the dinner.

#### **Political Animals RLFC**

The Political Animals would resume games in the New Year.

#### **AOB**

##### Player Representation/Organisations.

An alternate players association representing professional players had been mooted. A players association, recognised by the RFL was already in existence, and it was recommended that players should use that vehicle to press for change through the democratic processes in place.

##### BARLA Tour to Pakistan

BARLA were touring Pakistan, hence apologies from Spen Allyson and Ikram Butt for missing the meeting.

#### **Main Discussion: BBC Local Radio Consultation**

The Chairman stated the Group's intention to provide a formal response to the BBC and BBC Trust consultations affecting BBC Local Radio services. Much of the discussion at the meeting would be used to inform those submissions.

The Chairman introduced the panellists and provided a biography on each:

Ray French CBE, broadcaster and journalist  
Richard Lewis, RFL Chairman  
Charles Runcie, Head of Sport, BBC English Regions  
Ian Ramsdale, BBC London broadcaster and journalist

Charles Runcie explained the background to the consultations, stating that the Delivering Quality First review was a series which included BBC radio. The proposals contained within had an impact on sport, with the focus on providing main output during the day. There was no sense that a particular sport was to be cut over others, but rugby league and county cricket would lose most as they had relatively high coverage on local radio.



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Ray French made clear he was speaking in a personal capacity, as a fan of the sport. Having reviewed the proposals, he noted there would be a significant loss for rugby league. Although live coverage, in principle, was secure as it could be broadcast on the MW band, the cost to do so was prohibitive.

French referred to an internal BBC magazine which praised the number of listeners to BBC Local Radio services and included many people who received their sports update solely through BBC local radio.

The internet and the World Service provide vehicles for the BBC to deliver international coverage at no cost to those outside the UK, but for those at home there is a license fee to listen to local radio. It was noted in discussion that one of the key messages the BBC needed to understand was that for a wide range of communities, BBC Local Radio was the only means through which information was received.

Further, it was recognised that the BBC was subject to a cut in income whilst having to deliver greater services, including the World Service, both of which were an issue for the government.

It was recommended that the Group make the case for local radio as a special service, suggesting that the proposals contained within the consultations would remove much of the local aspect of radio.

Ian Ramsdale spoke of the wide spectrum of sport in London, with 23.5 hours of sport being covered, mostly in the evening. As the proposals had most effect on evening broadcast, BBC London's coverage of rugby league would be reduced significantly, to 5% of the existing level.

London has the second biggest listeners after Yorkshire based on Sky Sports viewing figures and the loss of coverage of London Broncos games and rugby league magazine shows could potentially wipe out the opportunity for people to follow the game.

Richard Lewis said he was outraged with the proposals. The impact on London and on medium wave broadcasts had the potential to be devastating. He continued saying there was a need to find in detail the impact the proposals would have on the game, particularly if local stations would choose to not provide coverage on medium wave.

Examples were provided from the North West region, specifically Manchester and Merseyside. There was concern over the loss weeknight magazine shows and it was felt that minority sports – which were specifically noted as important to the BBC – would like be brought together. By homogenising coverage, the principle of local radio reflecting the local community it served would be lost. Sport was one of the most effective ways of bringing communities together. Magazine shows during evenings were able to answer questions that arose of the previous weekend's games. Their importance was evidenced by the level of player, official and governing body feedback provided to each.

Discussion moved to the presentation of the consultations. It was felt that not only did they fail to make clear the gravity of the proposals; they were disingenuous as they suggested the impact would not be significant when it was potentially devastating. There was a lack of detail and over-complication in both consultations and layouts and were unclear. The overall result was misleading, making it hard to understand what was at stake as well as how to respond.

The Group decided that there needed to be a substantive response, making clear that the BBC needed to rethink its position. Whilst it was understood that the BBC had to make cuts as well as take on additional services, it had not taken into account the bearing the proposals would have on local sports coverage.

The RFL said it would communicate with individual fans and give them the tools to respond.



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The Group agreed that it would write to BBC Director General Mark Thomas making clear its feelings on the consultations. Similarly, sports fans could do likewise and so needed to be made aware of the consultations and their consequences.

In final comments from the panellists, French felt the discussions had been useful; that the consequences of the consultations' proposals were difficult to explain and that people had not realised the affects. Runcie offered to work with the Secretariat and would feedback comments to the BBC and BBC Trust. Ramsdale reiterated that consequences were massive, particularly on the London audience. Lewis (also Chairman of Sport England) thanked the Group for bringing the issue to the fore and that he would take back to Sport England.

#### Actions

Chairman to write to all contacts in other Parliamentary Sports Groups asking for meeting.

Chairman to write to Lord Patten and Mark Thompson to make clear the Group's position on the consultations and ask for a meeting.

Secretariat to prepare document making clear the effect on sport and disseminate as widely as possible.

Charles Runcie to feedback to BBC and BBC Trust.