



All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

Ordinary Meeting

10th July 2012 Committee Room 13

Present

Greg Mulholland MP (Chairman); Yvonne Fovargue MP (Secretary); Derek Twigg MP; Lindsay Hoyle MP

In attendance

Group Secretariat: Mark Ramsdale

Organisational Associate Members: Ralph Rimmer (RFL); David Gent (RFL); Spen Allison (BARLA)

Individual Associate Members (no affiliation): Maurice Oldroyd; Anton Muszanskyj

Press: Phil Hodgson (League Express)

Non-Members: Eric Czerwionkia; Gary Job; David G Wilson; Jeff Charlton

Apologies

Lord Smith; David Amess MP; Barbara Keeley MP; Shaun Woodward MP; Simon Revell MP; David Mowat MP; Jason McCartney MP; David Hinchliffe; Niel Wood.

Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were considered an accurate record.

Matters Arising

The request was put to Members of the Group to consider what more could be done to support the Tackle it! campaign. A reception was planned for November 2012. Lindsay Hoyle had offered use of the Speaker's apartments.

Action: Secretariat to liaise with RFL.

Correspondence

Sent

Correspondence had been received regarding a nomination for services to rugby league. The Group was delighted to receive such correspondence and would do what it could to support any appropriate nominations to ensure more people in rugby league receive appropriate recognition.

Action: Secretariat to raise with the relevant MP and consider opportunities.

Group Activity Report

Parliamentary Activities

The Secretariat provided a synopsis of Questions, Debates, Motions and all mentions of rugby league in both Houses of Parliament.

South Africa Rugby League

The Secretariat outlined on-going communication with South Africa Rugby League and the Rugby League European Federation regarding the South African government's position that SARL would not be granted governing body status within South Africa as rugby league was not recognised as stand-alone sport.



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The UK Sports Minister had been informed and letters sent to all Group Members and other non-UK politicians outlining the situation and requesting formal written support be sent to SARL.

Action: Secretariat to continue liaison, lobbying and report back to the Group.

Political Animals Report

The Political Animals were to play their now traditional fixture on the eve of the Challenge Cup Final, held at London Skolars' Friday Night Lights event. This year, the opposition would be a London Select Masters side.

Since the untimely departure of the club's previous sponsor, new sponsors were being sought.

Any Other Business

The Chairman stressed to Associate Members that the meeting represented the start of a new year for the Group and for those who pay at this time, should ensure the Secretariat has received payment.

Business concluded at 1837



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Presentation: The State of the Game

Ralph Rimmer, RFL Chief Operating Office

David Gent, RFL Director of Participation and Strategic Partnerships

The Chairman welcomed Ralph Rimmer and David Gent, respectively RFL Chief Operating Officer and Director of Participation and Strategic Partnerships, to discuss the broad state of the game.

Gent spoke about the community game, saying it was in a healthy position with 105,000 registered players as agreed with Sport England and verified by KPMG, with more to add after touch rugby league players had been considered. The number of recognised Active People within rugby league had risen by 13,000 in the previous year, driven by the open age group.

With 67,000 school children and 20,000 young people in community clubs, these combined represent a positive turnaround and rugby league is in a very good place, with Gent confident for further growth due to the opportunity to play year round.

As would other governing bodies, it was anticipated that the RFL would receive less money from Sport England than in previous years; however, the drop would likely be less relatively due to increased participation and the development in the games' structure.

On the Four Seasons project, Gent made clear the purpose was to put the player at the heart of the game. Completion rates were good, but there were areas of difficulty such as underlying issues on financing and huge reliance on Sport England, which was not sustainable in the current structure.

There were an extra 113 teams in the junior leagues – aged 5-16 – but the challenge remained the 16-19 age group which lost 12 teams. One solution would be to grow the number of open age teams which could include 16-year-olds.

In addition, there was the suggestion that touch rugby was not seen as rugby league. Therefore, touch rugby would become touch rugby league. To coincide with the change, one of the UK's biggest five-a-side football providers had been contracted to deliver a new national offering, and 180 venues had signed up to the launch.

Gent concluded by highlighting that if rugby league was to remain diverse and welcoming to all, it had to consider alternatives and put players at the core. In order to deliver that, it would need to prioritise.

Following Gent, Rimmer spoke about the professional game and its clubs. He highlighted that changes at community level had been radical, and that the professional game had to do the same to move forward. Acknowledging that the game required better commercial and geographical penetration, he also noted that in Super League, the bar for entry by new clubs was very high.

The professional game had developed in recent years, becoming more professional off-the-field and therefore these were a need for an holistic view and a sensitive integration of the community and professional levels of the sport.

Four new teams were to be introduced at Championship One level. Whilst this represented a very high level of rugby league, it offered relatively low financial risk to the game. If this model proved a success, two more clubs may be considered for the division with likely candidates coming from outside the heartlands to engage with new players and spectators to create a genuine national offering.



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All clubs have a responsibility to the game and conditions were attached to them receiving central funding. For example £30,000 investment may rest on player pathway development, whilst another £30,000 might depend on a club providing regular management accounts to the RFL. There had been 35 expressions of interest to enter as a new Championship One club in 2013. After reviewing in great detail, there were five remaining, with three having been announced.

The standard of the Championship and Championship One is very high, but this would give the leagues a timely national footprint. Discussions were being held with Super League clubs about adopting lower-league clubs and locations. This might see, for example, academy sides playing friendlies against Championship One clubs.

Echoing Gent's comments about the different versions of the sport, Rimmer praised community side University of Gloucester All-Golds which had done extremely well against in the recent Rugby League 9s tournament, beating Super League clubs.

A new club may be formed in Oxford, involving individuals with strong track records in the sport such as Simon Lee, Tony Colquitt and Tevita Vaikona.

All decisions on new clubs were based on a great deal of empirical evidence. These changes represent a significant journey for rugby league and February 2013 could represent a very exciting week.

Moving to Super League, Rimmer explained that at the start of this licensing period, there had been much debate about how many clubs would operate in the league. The debate on the number of clubs in Super League continued, as did promotion and relegation. Following the Watkins Review, a strategic policy review would ensue involving the key stakeholders.

Rimmer acknowledged the romance of promotion and relegation battles is lost in a licensing regime, however the practicalities of promotion and relegation were a challenge. A club would not find out until October that it was to be promoted, and would find it very difficult to source players as, by that time, they would all be in-contract with other established Super League clubs. This would be compounded off-field by the need to raise much higher revenue and adjust to £1.2m, from £100k, of central distribution within three months.

The Chairman thanked Rimmer and Gent and opened the floor to questions.

Women and Girls

When asked about the women and girls game, Gent said there had been not much growth, with approximately ten per cent female participation. This resulted in clubs being male-oriented and being seen as unwelcoming to girls. This had been recognised in the RFL's Whole Sport Plan, as was the tendency to focus on adults. The shift to the summer season had seen some changes in female participation, and a new website was to be launched. The greatest driver had been, and would continue to be in schools, where both genders participated on an equal basis. The RFL was writing to parents.

[Secretariat's note: The website is now live - www.womensrugbyleague.co.uk]

The Chairman noted there were exceptions, citing the example of Leeds Akkies – for which he is President and plays in the Masters team. The community club simply worked – games were scheduled to suit all teams and the culture within the club was welcoming.

Representing Associate Member BARLA, Spen Allison spoke of the eight female teams within its leagues. These were played in a tremendous atmosphere and had generated lots of interest. He noted that in Pakistan, there were 25,000 players with girls mixing with boys.



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Action: Secretariat to circulate RFL research to Group Members

Rugby League Express reporter Phil Hodgson gave his experience as a father of three daughters, that women and girls are not made as welcome as men and boys at clubs and issues creep in. This simply happened due to the level of male players and participation. He suggested that where public money is provided, checks and measures could be applied. Further, in a competitive market, one of the bigger challenges for boys' participation was engagement of the sport with mothers.

Action: Secretariat to investigate a women's rugby league event.

Bradford Bulls

It was noted that there was a sense of anger amongst fans that money was raised throughout the sport to secure Bradford Bulls' future, but that money had disappeared or been provided to the taxman. The question as to whether it should have happened was put, as was the need for a review once all had been resolved.

Rimmer reiterated that the RFL was not responsible for actions of clubs or their administrators. The RFL and the public had been informed that the Bulls' directors required £500,000 to solve the club's financial issues. It became clear this had not been the case when the administrators finally reviewed the club's accounts.

The RFL does not have the ability to prevent a club entering administration. However, as a governing body the RFL could review all offers for the club and assess merits. Super League clubs rightly want there to be no competitive advantage gained through accepting any offer and wish to see all applications treated in a fair and equitable manner.

The Bulls' situation raised issues within the sport, about the role and responsibility of the RFL. All sport governing bodies faced these dilemmas and are in a similar position.

The sport's profile needs to be raised by such things as England winning the World Cup and geographical expansion. The RFL does not want to alienate a single fan and all access routes into the sport need to be developed. This should grow the sport organically.

Expansion

Returning to the move enabling the sport to be played year-round, Gent stressed that the decision was for the players and clubs alone. The RFL had made clear that the purpose was to enable those playing the game to decide and had not taken steps to force a decision on any club and on that basis, many letters of support had been received which could be made available.

The current season was the first in the new model and there would be a review. Of frustration were decisions made on players' behalf to push agendas to force clubs to return to play rugby league during a season when the majority in a club did not wish to play at that time.

Gent stressed the need to allow the first year to run its course before considering next steps; he reiterated that teams could play when they wished, be it primarily over the summer or the winter.

The Chairman thanked the speakers for their time and extended an open invitation to members of the rugby league press, some of whom had attended.

Meeting concluded at 1933