



All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

Ordinary Meeting Minutes

11th June 2013 Committee Room 13

Meeting commenced 1812

In Attendance

Members: Greg Mulholland MP (in the Chair); Lord Hoyle; Lord Smith of Leigh; Lord Thomas of Gresford; Lord Granchester; Derek Twigg MP

Group Secretariat: Mark Ramsdale

Organisational Associate Members: Spen Allison (BARLA, Hon Life Member); Tony Colquitt (Oxford RL)

Individual Associate Members (no affiliation): Maurice Oldroyd (Hon Life Member); Dave Rammage; Chris Byron; Mark Billyard

Non-Members: Tom Williams (Hemel Stags); Paul Thorman (London Skolars); Robert Webber (Gloucester All-Golds); Chris Norbury (Gloucester All-Golds); Carl Horsman (Brentwood RLFC)

Welcome

On behalf of the Group, the Chairman welcomed Associate Members to the first meeting after the Group's AGM, particularly the first clubs to join the Group as such, Bradford Bulls and Oxford Rugby League.

[Secretariat's Note: Brentwood Eels joined immediately after the meeting]

Action: A press release to be sent out announcing the clubs' joining the Group.

The Chairman reported the Officer elections to the Group, paying particular tribute to new Group President, Lord Hoyle.

Apologies

James Clappison MP; Lindsay Hoyle MP; Dave Watts MP; Kris Hopkins MP; Lisa Nandy MP; Gerry Sutcliffe MP; Simon Reevell MP; David Gent; Alex Mitchell; Gavin Willacy; Hazel McCluskey; Paul Cypher; Niel Wood; Colin Ward; Gary Brook; David Wilson; Barrie Smith; Andy Habbershaw; Stephen Johnson; Ikram Butt

Minutes of the Previous Meeting

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

Matters Arising

The Secretariat raised the on-going activities:

- Visit to see England Wheelchair games
- Investigating various activities relating to wheelchair rugby league, including Members being made aware of local clubs, attending games and a Political Animals game.
- Compilation of the complete list of the Super League Player of the year.
- Consolidation of Group records.
- Preparation of the process for contacting local politicians regarding Associate Membership of the Group.

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- Investigation into events for Women & Girls in sport and inclusivity
- A memorial at the National Arboretum honouring rugby league playing and supporting servicemen and servicewomen.
- Secretariat support of visit of World Cup to the French President.

Correspondence

Sent

- No formal correspondence was sent since previous meeting

Received

- A note from the family of Thomas Disken thanking the Group for its letter of condolence.
- Details of the Active Peoples survey from Sport England, as requested.
- A letter from RBS regarding Rugby Force
- Copies of correspondence relating to South Africa Rugby League's bid to become a recognised sport in South Africa.

Pending

- Letter to Sheffield Hallam Vice Chancellor research supplied to the BBC for a piece on finances of Super League clubs.
- Communication with the Serbian and the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Parliamentary Groups regarding the first official game of rugby league having been played there.
- Letter to Queensland Rugby League regarding the alleged murder of the Brisbane Referee's Association President, Tony McGrath.

Group Activity Report

Parliamentary

The Secretariat listed the number of references to rugby league in Parliament since the previous meeting.

AOB

No other business had been received.

The meeting concluded at 1848

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Presentation: Rugby League Southern Group - Gloucester All-Golds; Hemel Stags; London Skolars; Oxford Rugby League

Representatives from Gloucester All-Golds, Hemel Stags, London Skolars, and Oxford Rugby League delivered presentations to the Group.

[Secretariat's note: All presentations are available on the Group's website].

On behalf of the Group, the Chairman thanked the representatives of the clubs, noting the Group's continued interest in expansion of the sport, particularly outside its heartlands, and that it was always happy to support and promote the game wherever possible.

Opening to questions, the clubs were asked about how they worked with Super League clubs. For Oxford, the decision had been taken early to develop talent at local level but to tie with a Super League club for credibility. For them, the focus was about growing and sustaining a professional rugby league club in Oxfordshire and providing the opportunity for children to play the game and acting as a slingshot to other aspects of the sport. Skolars worked closely with London Broncos, sharing operational elements and players. For the previous six years the clubs' opening game was against one another – branded the Capital Challenge. On performance, the dual registration system allowed the club access to Broncos' first team fringe players without prohibitive levels of paperwork. In the Skolars-Broncos case, the final decision belonged to the head coach who – as a former player at Broncos - had particular affinity to the Super League club.

Questioning moved to expansion outside the traditional heartlands of rugby league. It was recognised that all the presentations were progressive and about establishing roots. For the Gloucester All-Golds, the club was able to appeal to school children, keeping all active and the sport does not marginalise anyone taking part. In addition, they were working with the police and other community stakeholders, something other sports did not do as well. Once exposed to the game and its work in the community, people were converted into rugby league fans and the sooner that could be achieved in Gloucester and elsewhere, the better. Hemel had no history or professional sport in the area, and the Stags' work in the community included work with offenders.

All those presenting were working together, free from tribal animosity. In so doing, it created a point of difference that allowed for greater opportunity. It was felt there was no greater opportunity for rugby league but to grow and expand. On a commercial basis, this was best served through strategically and organically.

Between them, the clubs had spotted and developed talent and it was expected that they could develop future stars of the game and challenge Super League clubs if they could channel talent to remain in rugby league rather than the more locally-established rugby union outfits. Countering concerns over attendance, it was noted that spectator levels did not represent the strength of the game, particularly in London, where participation was high and growing, and talent had been developed to the point where some schools had students that could play professionally and become genuine rugby league players.

Operationally, location has an impact. It was recognised that as a truly national league, Championship One had a local flavour for the four clubs in the south which had helped to encourage people to see games. However, a consequence of such a geographically diverse league was relatively high travel costs for all clubs in the division.

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The clubs were asked for thoughts on the RFL's policy review, specifically the structural proposals that were under consultation. It was felt that changes were required, quickly and drastically. Super League and its play-off system were both considered too big, the latter rewarding mediocrity. For the league, it was felt there could be 8-10 teams competing on a sustainable basis.

Fans and the wider public understand and like promotion and relegation. It was felt that for some clubs a place in Super League was sustainable but others struggled to become established and faced a boom-and-bust scenario. For clubs that found themselves in this situation, they might prefer to not play in Super League. For clubs with the opportunity to take promotion into a league above, some may choose to stay in their current league.

Super League provides a lot of money into the game; it was felt that the question about what would broaden appeal should be put to Sky Sports or other broadcasters. The RFL's policy review represents a singular opportunity to review and listen to the marketplace. The statistics for rugby league are positive, and administrators need to be given the chance to make the necessary changes to reflect that and bring more money into the game.

For some, repeated consultation and potential change erodes the sport's brand. It was felt changes were needed, but they had to be simple, introduced quickly, and something that the public and television could understand. Spectators were valued as the biggest partner in the game, and they had to be provided something compelling that reflected their wants. That would result in promotion and relegation returning and a change to the licensing criteria that, when combined, provide clarity and incentive, particularly for those at the bottom of a league.

This could have impact on London Broncos. It was felt that the club would receive the same level of spectator support if it were in Championship and could not continue to receive the privileged status of a Super League license. Since forming and playing at Fulham FC, the club had never found a stable home and the Stoop was considered by some to be the wrong location, particularly for antipodes. London sports fans were used to seeing the best teams in particular sports. Until London developed a top-class team, Londoners would not turn to rugby league. Prior to 1995, London had enjoyed success amongst casual supporters as the only professional rugby team in the capital. Since that time, rugby union clubs turned professional, standards improved and London teams prospered.

The damage of their not being a London club was recognised, and tribute was paid to London Broncos Chairman David Hughes who had kept the club alive and put a lot of money into the team.

Concluded at 1928.

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