



# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting Minutes

### 26<sup>th</sup> February 2014 Committee Room 9

Meeting commenced 1802

### In Attendance

**Members:** Greg Mulholland MP (in the Chair); James Clappison MP (Vice-Chairman); Gerry Sutcliffe (Secretary); MP Lord Thomas of Gresford; Yvonne Fovargue MP

**Honorary Life Members:** Maurice Oldroyd (no affiliation)

**Organisational Associate Members:** Major David Groce (GBRL); Sue Taylor (BARLA)

**Individual Associate Members (all, no affiliation):** David Ballheimer; Dave Rammage; Martin Coyd

**Other:** Sally Bolton (RLWC2013); Mo Saqib (office of Greg Mulholland MP)

**Secretariat:** Mark Ramsdale

### Apologies

**Members:** Mark Pawsey MP; Dave Watts MP

**Honorary Life Members (all, no affiliation):** Sir Ian McCartney; David Hinchliffe; Spen Allison

**Organisational Associate Members:** Nigel Wood (RFL); David Gent (RFL); Ralph Rimmer (RFL); Ernie Benbow (1leagu3); Carl Horsman (Brentwood Eels)

**Individual Associate Members (all, no affiliation):** Iain McIlwee; Stephen Johnson; Ken Edwards; Jeff Charlton; Anton Muszankyj; Chris Byron; Joel Byron; Dave Rammage

### Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous Group meeting were considered an accurate account.

### Matters Arising

The Secretariat raised the on-going activities:

- Associate Membership for councillors

### Associate Membership

The Chairman reiterated previous statements about the importance the Group places on having Associate Members and how much it values Associate Members' involvement.

Recalling unsavoury incidents at the previous two meetings, the Chairman made clear that Group cannot allow anyone to abuse their Associate Member status and cause disruption at or around meetings. Behaviour such as that exhibited in the two prior meetings by a former Associate Member would not be tolerated and due to the nature of said behaviour, the Group had no choice but to take action and remove permanently the status of Associate Member from the individual concerned and remove any potential future involvement with the Group.

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## Correspondence

### Sent

- Letter to the Pakistan Federal Minister for Petroleum & Natural Resources regarding support for Pakistan Rugby League.
- Letter to the CEO of the National Arboretum from Vice-Chairman Lindsay Hoyle regarding the creation of a memorial for rugby league players injured and killed in service.
- Letter to an Associate Member removing said status.
- Letter to the organisers of Bristol's RLWC2013 game.
- Letter to the Chairman of the BBC Trust regarding the removal of rugby league from the banner of the international version of the BBC Sport homepage.
- Letter to First Utility welcoming their support for rugby league and inviting to a Group meeting.

### Received

- Letter from the Chairman of BARLA clarifying relationship with a former Associate Member.
- Letter from the RFL CEO updating the Group on activities and events over the preceding month.
- Correspondence regarding the 15 February anniversary of the first rugby league test match between England and the New Zealand All-Golds in 1908.
- Letter from the RFL regarding clarification of timing and rounds of the Challenge Cup.
- Correspondence regarding support for a bid to secure a home for rugby league in Nottingham, where rugby league has been played for 30 years.

### Pending

- Letter from the Chairman to France Rugby League.

## Group Activity Report

### Parliamentary

The Secretariat updated the Group on mentions of rugby league in Parliament since the last meeting. Lords Hoyle and Thomas of Gresford took part in a Question for Short Debate on competitive sport for school children on Monday 25 February. Lord Hoyle discussed the RFL's Primary Rugby League programme; Lord Thomas discussed the work of North Wales Crusaders (interest declared).

### Public

The Group sent out news on Tetley's becoming a supporter of the Group; and on its Super League player of 2013.

## Political Animals Report

The Secretariat (also Political Animals club Secretary) raised:

- the upcoming game against the Army Veterans side as part of a celebration of 20 years of Army Rugby League. All Members and Associate Members are eligible to play; and
- a potential game against a journalists XIII.

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#### Super League Player of 2013

The Secretariat announced the Group had awarded Danny Brough its Super League player of 2013, with a presentation made at the Giants' first home game of the season by lifelong Giants fan, Jason McCartney MP.

#### Bradford Bulls

The Chairman raised reports on the status of Bradford Bulls, calling the situation "very worrying, and very sad" given the position the club was in few years ago.

Public statements from the RFL and Bulls' Chairman Mark Moore were available to the meeting. Former Bulls Chairman Gerry Sutcliffe provided background based on his time with the club and an outline of revenue streams for Super League clubs was raised by David Ballheimer.

The club was now in a better financial position and a consortium was looking to get involved. However, entering into administration breached Super League operational rules and it should have therefore been no surprise that the club was docked points. Sutcliffe felt it unfair that television rights money was redistributed to other Super League clubs; a decision taken by the clubs in the league.

Sutcliffe was hoping for a speedy resolution, and grateful to all those who wanted to see a club with such a long history and strong support continue. His closing point was that the competition can't afford to have clubs in this position.

Whilst representing RLWC2013, Sally Bolton was prepared to provide a response. Super League operational rules make clear the reduction of points and funding for entering administration, and there was precedent. The RFL acts as arbiter of the league's operation and in its best interest. Were Super League operating in a relegation environment, sanctions would likely be much more severe.

The business plans of any serious contender to take on the club would be reviewed, with financial security paramount. The example of football's using future gate receipts as security on debt was given, but in the case of Super League, no club receives advance money without personal security.

It was suggested the situation was unfair on clubs operating within their means, and that the situation had failed fans of the club and fans of other clubs who had donated money to help the Bulls remain viable.

It was noted that the modern game reflects on-field as well as off-field performance and that a club's licence can be withdrawn.

Members felt it was important to have a healthy Bradford Bulls club; with good crowds in challenging times it was good for the area as well as nearby clubs and those in Super League.

The Group reiterated its continued support for Bradford, the competition and the club's position with Super League.

**Action: At the next meeting with an RFL representative, the Group would ask about the salary cap.**

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#### AOB

Yvonne Fovargue raised a piece in The Times newspaper about Super League's clubs involvement in a newly-created scheme from the Royal Voluntary Service whereby older men who might otherwise not attend matches would be accompanied by volunteers to enjoy games with company.

#### **Action: Secretariat to liaise with RVS to arrange a presentation to the Group**

The Secretariat (interest declared) recorded the date of the 2014 Rugby League Varsity Match.

Main business concluded at 1833.

#### **Presentation: Sally Bolton, RLWC2013**

The Chairman welcomed RLWC2013 General Manager Sally Bolton to the meeting, offering her the full praise of the Group and noting its move from its usual timeslot to accommodate her attendance.

Speaking to a presentation, Bolton provided key elements of the tournament which had the vision to "stage a successful and profitable event that further enhances the international prestige of rugby league" and associate priorities to:

- Generate profit;
- Fill stadia;
- Provide an outstanding matchday experience;
- Grow into new and emerging markets; and
- Leave a tangible legacy

It was noted as vital to pass on the knowledge and experience from the 2013 tournament to enable RLWC2017 to be better again. This was a big piece of work that was to be concluded in March.

Tickets was a key factor in the success of the tournament with 48% of profits generated by sales, and full stadia creating a fantastic spectacle, particularly for those new to the sport. With 100,000 spectators attending rugby league games each week and relatively few fans travelling from overseas, the target of five times that amount would require many new attendees at games.

The tournament achieved 458,000 spectators and was able to deliver a record hosting fee to the RLIF. Key aspects were the momentum generated by sell-out games, record crowds at stadia, and locations such as Bristol which delivered on calculated risk.

Related was the need to ensure crowds were entertained consistently at all matches and looked like a spectacle on television; it was important to ensure people did not feel they were attending a local home game.

As part of this strategy, activities around games were centred on selling tickets and filling stadia and were embedded in the local communities, not least by providing entertainment an hour before kick-off, with the final 20minutes – shown on television – provided by RLWC2013. Consistently high quality entertainment on television delivered a feelgood factor and generated further interest which in turn helped deliver 35% of ticket sales from outside traditional rugby league areas and now provides an opportunity to communicate with new markets.

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A lot of resources were invested into education elements to support the communities in which games were being played, focusing on matchday activities and inspiring children. Cultural programmes driven by work with the Arts Council to create a dance programme were set up and supported teachers and elite dancers at the opening ceremony.

The semi-finals generated a lot of interest, with 2.8million people watching an exceptional England game. Similarly, over 2.4million watched the opening ceremony.

RLWC2013 was the first tournament in the social media era and drove a great deal of engagement. Started from a zero base, there are 28,000 followers on twitter, and Facebook reach never fell below 60,000 per month with 500,000 in November. This represents a strong base for the RLIF to take over.

It was essential to create a good format and schedule; people need to think it happened by magic. Three years before the tournament, venue locations and the need to create momentum were considered at depth. Momentum is either with you or against you and if a strong start is made, it can be built upon. It was important to get to the first Wednesday with a bang to ensure momentum had been built.

In terms of governance, the tournament has created a professional standard model for 2017.

Responding to a question regarding support from government and the media, it was noted Government backing of the tournament as part of the gold series of events was important. In terms of media, this presented a larger challenge as there was a need to overcome the negative sense over the 2000 tournament.

Bolton would have liked to have done more, but it is important to recognise the transient nature of public interest. RLWC2013 started publicising in earnest in August.

Many raised Bristol as an impressive event and a highlight of the tournament. For those involved in the tournament's delivery this was the point when they knew the tournament would be a success.

Closing the meeting, the Chairman noted the pressure on delivering a successful tournament was hard to imagine, particularly as the rugby league community has a reputation for being blunt.

He reiterated his and the Group's thanks and praise for Bolton and her team.

The meeting concluded at 1920

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