



# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting Minutes

### 24<sup>th</sup> March 2015 Committee Room 20

Meeting commenced 1807

#### In Attendance

**Members:** Greg Mullholland MP (Chairman); Lord Hoyle (President); Rt. Hon. Lindsay Hoyle MP (Vice-Chairman); Lord Thomas of Gresford

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

**Organisational Associate Members:** David Gent (RFL); Gary Hetherington (Leeds Rhinos); Sue Taylor (BARLA); Ikram Butt (BARA)

**Individual Associate Members (all, no affiliation):** David Ballheimer; Steve Evans

**Other:** Mike Edwards

**Secretariat:** Mark Ramsdale; Jack Baker

#### Welcome

The Chairman welcomed new Individual Associate Members Stuart Morris and John Piercy, and expressed his delight at such a healthy Associate Membership; testament to the great work done by the Secretariat.

#### Apologies

**Members:** Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe; Mary Creagh MP; Jason McCartney MP; Lord Grantchester

**Honorary Life Members (all, no affiliation):** David Hinchliffe; Ray French MBE; Sir Ian McCartney; Neil Turner; Spen Allison; Neville Smith; Sally Bolton OBE

**Organisational Associate Members:** Nigel Wood, Ralph Rimmer (RFL); Ernie Benbow (1eagu3); Mike Smith (Hull KR); Richard Thewlis (Huddersfield Giants);

**Individual Associate Members (all, no affiliation):** Stephen Johnson; Richard Jones; Iain McIlwee; Gary Slater; Neil Turner

#### Minutes of the Previous Meeting

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

#### Matters Arising

The Secretariat raised the following on-going activities not covered by the meeting's agenda:

- Secretariat investigating measurement metrics for media coverage investigation.
- Meetings with Members will be scheduled for:
  - Karen Moorehouse & RFL COO Ralph Rimmer on player disciplinary procedures
  - Danny Kazandjian, RLEF General Manager, on rugby league in Italy.
- The Secretariat will draft an updated constitution to for the AGM to reflect better the way the Group operates and incorporate new levels of Associate Membership.
- The Secretariat will circulate details on the Annual Dinner after the General Election.

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#### Correspondence

- Letter from Her Majesty The Queen's Private Officer regarding Royal patronage of the game. The RFL has been informed and a response has been sent to The Private Secretary on the next steps.
- An update from the RFL on events during the recent month, and a copy of the RFL's strategic plan. Both were circulated to Members.
- Letter to the BBC Trust Chairman regarding the creation of a generic rugby account on Twitter but covering rugby union only. The letter recommends an account for each code, and appropriate names to make clear the difference. Also includes requests for better coverage of the game on the BBC nationally and in Wales in particular, and an invitation to the Trust Chairman to speak to the Group. There had been continued emails relating on the matter, including from one of the Group founders and Honorary Life Member, David Hinchliffe.
- Email from RLEF regarding an unsanctioned and unsupported tour to Italy by one of the Group's Associate Members. An invitation has been extended to the RLEF to discuss post-General Election.
- Letter to the Leader of Leeds City Council, copied to the local MP George Mudie, regarding support for Whinmoor Warriors' in light of a council consultation on reducing the number of community spaces.
- A message requesting twitter support for the Bramley Buffaloes RLFC U14s; this was retweeted from the Group and the Political Animals.
- Email from a New Zealand couple heavily involved in rugby league in Kenya asking for the Group to make introductions to Government representatives. Response has been provided; RLEF will be informed.

**Action: Letter to go to Kenya APPG and to Armed Services RL.**

- Letter to the Chairman of Wigan Warriors thanking the club and staff for recent help and hosting of the recent Political Animals game.
- Invitation to Rugby Oldham to speak to the Group. The Group has received a lot of requests to speak at meetings. A meeting schedule will be circulated as soon as possible, once the new Parliament has published dates.
- Responses to continued requests for information regarding dual registration issues, previously dealt with.

#### Pending

- Letter to all MPs in which Associate Members reside. The Secretariat will coordinate this following the general election.
- Letter to Streatham-Croydon RUFC supporting South London Storm RLFC's search for a location. Awaiting contact details.

#### Group Activity Report

##### Parliamentary

The RFL lead on Sky Try, the partnership between the RFL and Sky Sports to engage with 700,000 young people, visited Parliament to brief members on 11<sup>th</sup> March.

##### Public

Secretariat met representatives of the National Arboretum with RFL Director David Gent on 11 March.

- David Gent noted that Rugby League Cares would be taking the lead on this project
- Vice-Chairman Hoyle expressed his disappointment that the RFL had taken so long to take this idea forward, after it had been raised in the Group a year ago

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- The Chairman stated his hopes that communications between the RFL and the Group can improve in the next Parliament

The Group put out a press release on its position on the BBC's social media coverage.

At the time of the meeting, the Group had 1,394 followers on Twitter. The Group's twitter name is @UKParliamentRL

### Political Animals Report

The Secretariat reminded Members they are always eligible to play for the Political Animals (Associate Members are also) and reiterated the eligibility criteria are contained on the Animals' website and requested that all Associate Members who may know someone who could be eligible to review and introduce to the Club Captain (Group Chairman) or General Manager (Group Secretariat), not to tweet introductions publically.

The next game is likely to be on the Friday preceding the Challenge Cup Final against a London Select XIII.

The Chairman noted that the trophy for the Politicians vs. Journalists match (won by the Political Animals) is still missing, and called on everyone involved in rugby league to join in the hunt.

The Secretariat noted that funds raised for Rugby League Cares and Joining Jack from the Politicians vs. Journalists match were double the original target

### AOB

Main business concluded at 1838

The Chairman noted that this was the last meeting of this Parliament, and thanked Members for their hard work over the last five years, a period in which much was done to help the rugby league cause. Particular mention was given to those standing down at this election, notably Gerry Sutcliffe MP, the Group's Secretary, and to the Secretariat for their efforts.

### Presentation: Gary Hetherington, CEO of Leeds Rhinos RLFC

The Chairman welcomed Gary Hetherington from Leeds Rhinos RLFC.

Hetherington began by discussing his recent trip to Australia, and noted some significant developments in the game there. Currently the NRL's television deal is worth AUS\$1billion, which means that clubs benefit from a larger central grant, and an increase in the salary cap to AUS\$7million. This has seen vast increases in remuneration for players in recent years, and the advent of the AUS\$1million-a-year player.

There are now a number of English players in the NRL, whose success, whilst positive for the national team, could pose a threat to the domestic game here. Hetherington's proposed solution, to retain elite players, is to create central contracts between the RFL and Super League, which require that these players do promotional and other work on behalf of Super League and the national team.

Discussing changes to the domestic game in the UK, Hetherington praised the excellent new structure, which provides opportunities and advantages, and has seen improved crowds. The game has developed outside of the traditional heartlands too, with League 1 offering a pathway for these clubs to develop and progress.

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The development of the game has increasingly been taken on by professional clubs in the last decade. At Leeds, a charitable trust, the Leeds Rugby Foundation, was established, with four key objectives: to get more people involved in playing the game; to provide every youngster with the opportunity to watch the game; to improve standards, particularly at community clubs, through coach education; and to showcase the history and heritage of the game. Gradually, this has grown to employ 29 staff, and deliver a host of community initiatives related to education and health. Funding remains an issue, but the SkyTry initiative is to be commended for the support it has offered the foundations.

Closing, Hetherington remarked that he has been at Leeds for 18 years now, having taken over when the club was almost bankrupt, before, over the last ten years, enjoying the most successful period in the clubs history. Continues to find the job challenging, as there is a constant strive to get ahead, both on and off the pitch.

Responding to questions, the game has changed in recent years, with the top British teams now able to compete with those in the Southern Hemisphere. Leeds have played in six World Club Challenges over the last ten years, winning three and losing three. There remains a vast difference in participation, though; in Parramatta there are more players than in the whole of the UK at the under-14 age level.

On how the national side can achieve success in big competitions, the balance of players between the Super League and NRL is about right at present. The elite players do play too many games, though, which needs to be addressed.

The Secretariat noted that the Rugby League Players' Association in Australia were set to discuss a larger off season, and greater rests from playing.

On how a central contract system would work in practice, Hetherington suggested that the RFL ought to contract them for five years, with an obligation to remain in the Super League for that period, but not for a particular club.

On whether the absence of a British and Irish Lions side was a problem, England Rugby League can be just as big a brand.

The President felt that attendances have slipped across the game in the United Kingdom, and wondered what could be done. Hetherington felt that clubs could work harder to attract supporters, though acknowledge a lack of quality resources, and hoped that the coming years could see new stadiums for those clubs yet to build them. Season ticket holders are crucial; at Leeds, from an average attendance of 15,000, two-thirds have paid before arriving at the game.

On whether a lack of non-heartland clubs at the highest level should be of concern, Hetherington felt that most clubs would consider this a matter for the RFL, but that development in these areas is crucial

On what the Group can do to help the game, acknowledged the excellent work already done, and welcomed the continuation of this work, noting the recent pressure on the BBC related to coverage of rugby league.

The Chairman thanked Gary for his time, and reiterated his thanks to Members, Associate Members, and the Secretariat for their excellent work over the last five years. Closing the meeting, he expressed hope that the Group could continue to help the rugby league cause in the next Parliament.

#### Meeting closed at 1926

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